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by Lloyd Kevin

LONGHORN MAN
by Gene Austin

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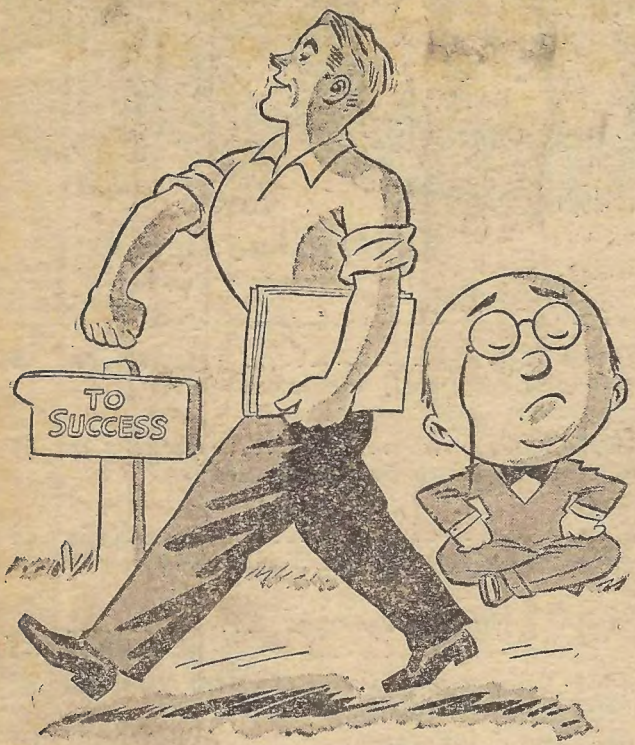

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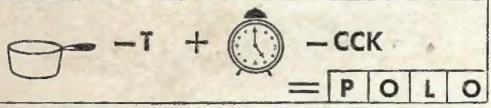
SAMPLE PUZZLE

The Correct Answer Is ONE Of These Names of Fame!

☐ Marco Polo ☐ Betsy Ross ☐ Genghis Khan ☐ Frank Buck



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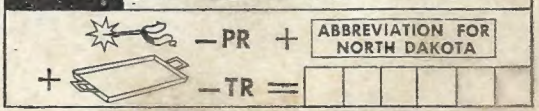

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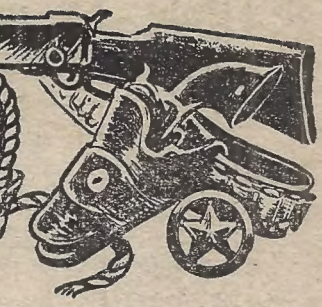

All New And Complete

Volume 22 APRIL, 1957 Number 6

1. **SIXGUN SIGNATURE (Novel)** ..... **Lloyd Kevin** 6
The forces that planned to take over Sugar Pine figured that the best way to tie Peter Cameron's hands was to make him Sheriff!

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ROBERT W. LOWNDES, *Editor* MARIE ANTOINETTE PARK, *Asso. Ed*

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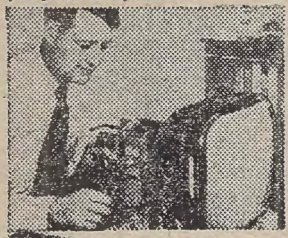

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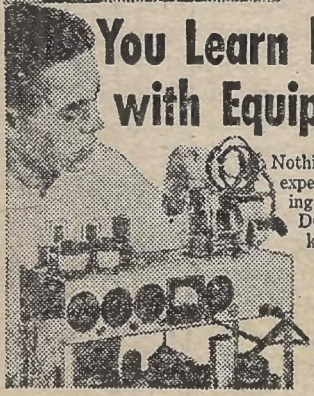

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SIXGUN SIGNATURE

Novice of Sinister Barriers

by Lloyd Kevin

Heavy in Pete Cameron's heart was the knowledge that Claire Huntley felt herself beholden to marry Eric Manx. And Eric had tied up with the scheming Lew Tyle, who was taking over Sugar Pine. But Cameron couldn't move against Eric—particularly, now that he was Sheriff—because everyone would say that this was a personal feud over a woman!

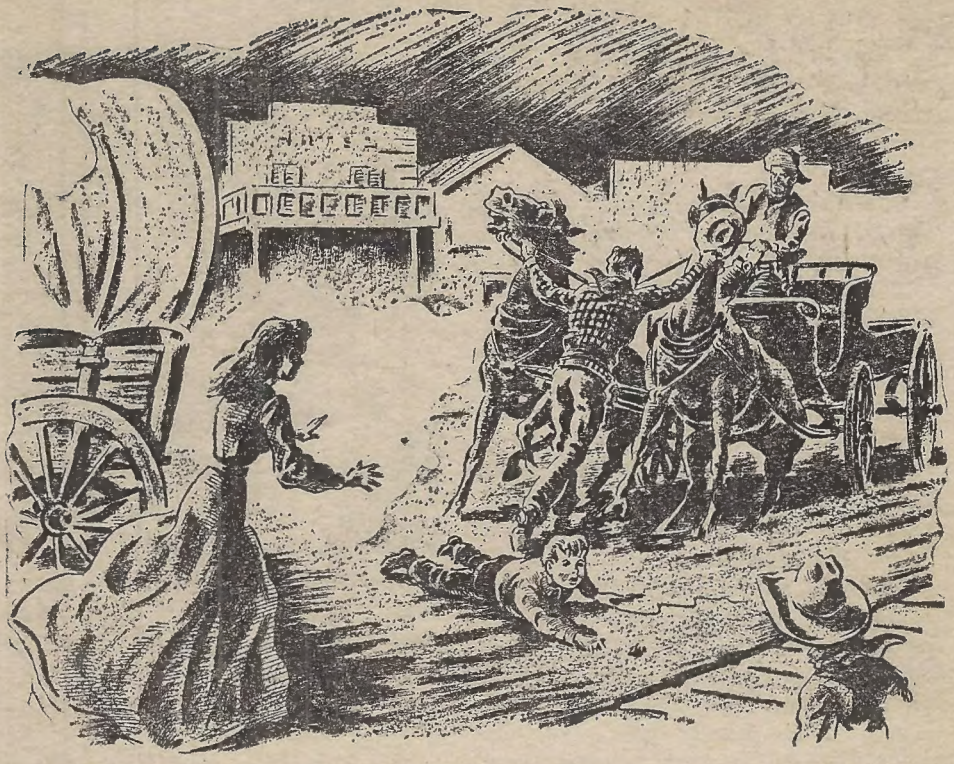
PETE CAMERON'S log and cedar-shake cabin nestled in a rock-rimmed gulch high on the western slopes of the Sierra Nevadas. The gulch furnished grazing for the fat herd of steers that wore his Walking-O brand, and he sold his beef in the roaring gold camps down the mountain. It paid better, and was a lot surer than mining; and it suited Cameron.

For Pete was every inch a hard-muscled, hard-riding cattleman, from his wiry straight black hair and granite-grey eyes to his lean and saddle-bowed legs. His battered Stetson bore thick smudges of pine-pitch from the sagging branches he ducked; and his rough blanket-lined jacket, his Levis and hand-stitched boots, carried the telltale scars of the high brush country.

Conspicuous at Pete's right thigh, as much a part of his apparel as boots or Stetson, hung his heavy Colt six-shooter. If Pete had been a bragging man, there could have been deep notches in the butt of that gun. But Pete Cameron hated that .41 Caliber Colt in its worn, oiled leather holster just as surely and as strongly as he depended on it.

Orphaned at eight, Pete had survived to grow up in the raw boom camps where gun-skill paid the ransom for precarious life, where every other wild-eyed hellion with a few drinks of bad whiskey under his belt felt the urge to hear his sixgun roar. Pete learned early to read the sign, to separate the straight cowhand who was only fighting the high lonesome from the snake-eyed killer with a lust for blood, and to trigger his own Colt a split-second faster when the chips were down.

Now at twenty-eight, Pete would have liked to forget the roar and the gunsmoke, the spilled blood in the sawdust and the reputation he had built. But the mark was on him. Something in the light in his grey



Pete slapped the lead horse of the plunging team with his hat, and the animal swerved.

eyes, the set of his firm shoulders, the determined swing of his stride, something he could never erase, set him apart from other men.

And every boom town and cow camp had its new crop of two-gun toters. There was always one among them to nudge his companion and jerk his head in Pete's direction.

"That's Pete Cameron—stood up against all three of the Hartog brothers back in Comstock City and left 'em chewin' dust. Whenever you have to face Cameron in a showdown—"

Pete drove ten head of fat steers down the rocky trail to the new gold town of Surgar Pine. Since the new mining boom on Bitter Creek, both Sugar Pine (to the southwest of Pete's ranch), and the rival camp of Narsville (to the north) had sprung into being. Gold had attracted a rough and reckless crowd into the hills, to slash the timber and muddy the streams and live off the land. The quiet of the hill was broken with pick and shovel, oath and gunshot; but the towns furnished a ready market for Cameron's beef.

Of the two camps, Pete preferred Sugar Pine. It was bigger, rowdier, and twice as crowded; but it had a hint of permanence in its location. A good stand of sugar pine timber promised work after the gold played out. And there was grazing in the lower valleys. To a man who had seen a dozen gold camps come and go, the idea of permanence held special appeal. And Butcher Hans Schmidt of Sugar Pine paid top prices for beef.

PETE HAZED his steers into Hans Schmidt's little two-by-four corral on the alley and pocketed the butcher's money.

"Now," the genial, red-faced Hans remarked. "mebbe you go paint the tonsils, buck the faro tiger, mebbe. Gives goot schnapps at Heinrick's bar!"

Cameron shook his head. "Not this time, Hans; got to be headin' back to the ranch."

The truth, Pete admitted to himself as he rode out into the crowded, dust-deep street between the freight wagons, was that he was too well known at Heinrick's. Some tinhorn would be sure to call to him, to name him in front of some trigger-proud punk who figured himself quick enough on the draw to win himself a readymade reputation.

And over at the *Double Eagle,* they wouldn't yet have forgotten the shooting of two weeks ago. Pale-haired Deuce Krup had sworn to settle an old score and had whipped out his sixgun. Pete never did learn the man's complaint; they carried Krup out the back way, feet first.

Pete reined up in front of the *Lucky Horseshoe.* The place would be crowded; the double doors swung constantly. There'd be drunken fights. Too much gold jammed the pokes of half the miners; too many empty pockets plagued the rest. Stopping here was asking for trouble—but man could get blamed lonesome by himself week after week on a Sierra gulch cattle outfit!

In spite of his sober intentions, Pete found a spot for his buckskin horse at the hitchrail and stepped up on the high plank sidewalk.

He turned for a look down the crooked, rutted street. A stage had pulled in from the coast, and natural curiosity drew his eyes to the coach door. The mere glimpse of feminine ruffles and lace would serve as a poignant reminder of the civilization that existed somewhere out beyond the horizon!

But only four men jumped down into the dust, three gold-seekers and

a derby-hatted drummer. Then a high, canvas-topped wagon pulled slowly past the stage depot and blocked his view.

Cameron frowned. He knew the driver of that wagon—the thin, boney-shouldered frame, the blue eyes and the fuzzy light hair circling a round head could only belong to Eric Manx, one of the partners who owned the Manx and Huntley Mercantile. By the droop of the man's shoulders, he appeared to be at the end of a along and wearying journey. He must have snaked that heavy outfit in over the high pass from the East. But by the warm glow of achievement in his eyes, it had to be a precious shipment.

Then Pete caught the soft flutter of feminine garments back under the shirt draped from a clothesline behind the canvas. No wonder, he thought, the man looked proud. Lucky devil—he'd brought his family with him!

The wagon moved slowly ahead a length or two and stopped, the way blocked by a lumber load and a team of balky mules. Cameron turned to elbow through the swinging doors, his loneliness suddenly welling up in him a hundredfold, an aching tightness in his throat that only whiskey would relieve.

But the boy caught his eye, a blond-

haired, brown-eyed youngster of about five, sitting behind the half-lowered endgate playing with string and wooden top with the quiet boredom of a thousand mile trip. As Pete looked, the top spun out of the boy's grasp and bounced off the endgate and out into the middle of the street.

The boy grabbed and missed. Without hesitation, he scrambled out over the endgate and dropped into the dust and dashed out after the toy.

PETE INSTINCTIVELY glanced up the hill, and a chill prickled through his veins. For once that side of the street was open, not even a mule or a saddle horse in the way, and a team and open buggy came bounding down the grade at a gallop.

Pete vaulted the end of the hitch-rail and reached the open street in four strides; he yanked off his hat and waved the driver down. But the man in the buggy was Lew Tyle, broad and beefy, thick-jawed and arrogant. Tyle was a promoter, a broker, a gambler, a money-lender—nobody gave orders to Lew Tyle. The man swung his whip and the team plunged ahead.

The boy had grabbed up his top and turned back, but in his haste he tripped and fell prone in the dust. Pete jumped over the boy and slapped his Stetson across the eyes of the nearest horse. The animal reared and plunged against the other horse; Cameron stooped and snatched the boy out from under the flailing hooves.

Lew Tyle cursed, cracked his whip, and the tip of the lash cut across Pete's right cheek with the sting of a branding iron. "Out of my way, or I'll run you down!"

Pete stepped back, shielding the boy. He met the man's eyes in cold challenge. "When you make your threats, Tyle—step down out of that buggy!"

The promoter stiffened, and a blue tightness crept along his heavy jaw. He was wearing an ivory-handled Colt in plain sight, but he kept his hands rigid on the lines. Carefully, he spoke to the team and drove away. It wasn't from reluctance to hurt the child, Pete knew, that Tyle had backed down; there was naked fear in every line of his face.

Pete swallowed, and a bitter sadness gripped him—someday soon he would have to kill Lew Tyle; here was another killing that couldn't be dodged.

He cradled the boy in his arms and strode to the wagon, but the young mother had climbed down and ran to meet him.

"Dale!" she cried. "Dale—are you hurt?" She caught the child out of Pete's arms and hugged him to her, her brown eyes wide was anxiety.

SHE HAD dropped her bonnet, Pete noticed, and her thick waves of dark-blonde hair gleamed like sand-scoured gold in the mountain sunlight. Long dark-gold lashes framed her wide brown eyes and caught the quick trace of tears.

Pete swallowed a lump in his own throat. "The boy ain't hurt a bit, Mrs. Manx," he assured her. "Just plumb scared!"

"Oh, thank you," the woman cried. "I can never thank you enough for the brave way you stopped that runaway team—" She moistened her handkerchief and wiped the dust from the child's brow. "But I'm not Mrs. Manx—I'm Claire Huntley."

Pete glanced to the front of the wagon where the boned-shouldered driver had tied up the reins and climbed down over a wheel on his way to join the woman and boy.

"Then your husband," Cameron remarked, "would be Dennis Huntley. I met him when he first opened the Mercantile—"

"My husband—" Claire Huntley began, then bit her lip. "We buried Dennis five hundred miles back on the trail—"

Pete caught his breath. "I'm sorry—" he gulped.

Then Eric Manx stood beside the young woman. "I'm obliged to you, Pete Cameron," he said stiffly, "for stoppin' Lew Tyle. Blamed reckless devil oughta be horsewhipped—" He took Claire Huntley's arm and helped her up into the wagon.

Horsewhipped, Pete thought, feeling his own lash-burned cheek; *I was the one horsewhipped.* And yet he hardly noticed. He was watching Claire Huntley up on the high seat of the heavy wagon, the shimmer of light on the perfect turn of her hair, the delicate line of her brow and nose, the way she snuggled the frightened boy against the curve of her neck.

And something in him changed—it was as though a sudden bond had grown between them, as though Eric Manx was driving away with something precious that belonged to Cameron, almost a part of him. It was sympathy, Pete guessed—sympathy for a young woman alone with her five-year-old son in the roughest gold camp in the Sierras. But she had Eric Manx to look out for her.

Maybe it was pity, such as he'd felt for the helpless fawn he'd found in the high meadow—and he'd become so attached to the animal that he couldn't drive it off and it became a pest around the ranch. It could be pity. Then the wild thought struck him—it could be love!

But a man didn't fall in love with a widow and child he'd met for the first time in his life two minutes ago—it didn't make sense. He hadn't even known until the last minute that she was a widow; he felt sorry for her, that was all.

But whatever it was he felt, it left him shaky and uncertain, standing in the middle of the street. He caught himself starting after the wagon. He was locoed, he reasoned, as a weedy bronc!

Deliberately, he turned to the *Lucky Horseshoe Saloon.* A good stiff drink would straighten him out. Nothing like whiskey to knock the foolishness out of a man!

The bar was crowded. Pete found an opening and ordered his drink and stared into the back-bar mirror at the swelling red welt along his cheek. Maybe, he thought, he was in love. Or maybe he was just lonely. At twenty-eight, a man needed a family, someone to care for, something to work for, something more to call his own than a wild, rocky, lonely gulch in the Sierras and a log-and-shake cabin with two tame chickaree squirrels nesting in the attic!

He thought of the boy he had held in his arms, light as a newborn calf to carry, yet sturdy, husky, healthy full of life. Dale, his mother had called him—Dale had looked up into Cameron's eyes with trust and confidence, a kind of earnest, thankful devotion.

Some of the same look had shown in Claire Huntley's brown eyes, too, he remembered. To her, he hadn't been just another gun-swinging cowpuncher. For a moment, he had been a trusted friend.

But this was no place to be thinking of Claire; Pete finished his drink and tossed his money on the bar and turned to leave. For the first time in his life he had paid no attention to the sudden hush, the quick scattering of men away from the bar, all the warning signs.

HE TURNED to face a drawn gun in the brown hand of a lean and dark, almost Indian-type of mountaineer. The man's eyes blazed violent hatred and he bared his teeth. "Pete Cameron!" the man gritted. "You shot my brother—Len Donkell. I'm Snake Donkell—"

Pete's mind spun crazily as he stiffened to meet the challenge. Caught daydreaming as never before, his pulse galloped. The name meant nothing to him, nothing at all.

"You shot my brother," Donkell persisted. "Shot him down in cold blood in the *El Granito Saloon*—now I'll make you crawl!"

El Granito—the place clicked in Pete's memory. He steadied, suddenly cold and sure. "You lie," he said evenly. "Your brother shot the bartender and a Mexican puncher, and turned his gun on me." Cameron had never deliberately started a fight in his life—and he'd never yet run away from one.

Donkell cursed brokenly. "Beg, you coyote-whelp! I'll—" He brandished the gun. "I'll gut-shoot you and make you crawl—"

"Shoot—or simmer down!" Pete warned. "If you're waitin' for me to draw—" he spun suddenly sideways and his hand dipped to his holster.

Donkell pulled the trigger. The bullet burned across Pete's shirt-front just above the belt; an inch closer, Pete knew, and it would have opened him up like a gutted steer. Then Cameron's .41 spoke. Donkell tried to fight the hammer of his gun back once more, to stay on his feet and finish his job. But the life went out of his eyes, and he folded over and pitched into the sawdust.

Pete blew the smoke from his gunbarrel and replaced the empty shell. He looked around the room, still cold-eyed. Not a man moved; if Donkell had a friend, he wasn't showing.

Pete holstered his gun and strode out through the swinging doors. And then the old sadness, the familiar sickness came over him. He'd killed another man. His life would never change.

And he had dared to think he could earn a woman's love...

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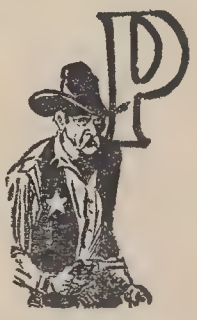

PETE CAMERON spent a sleepless night in his little cabin against the rocky rim of the gulch. Claire Huntley meant nothing to him, he told himself over and over; she was only the unfortunate widow of a man who had died on the trail. The same thing happened every day. Dozens of women found themselves suddenly alone in a strange and friendless town. The road to the West took its heavy toll of human life.

But he kept picturing in his mind the gold town of Sugar Pine as it would look to the woman with a small child in her care—the lumbering, crowding freight wagons, the loud and profane drivers, the reckless riders and the drunks shooting crazily in the street.

Claire Huntley must have come from the East. Even the brown hills of the Sierras would look harsh and forbidding to her—if the stories of the rolling green Eastern timberland he'd heard were true. And the wild lawlessness of the gold camp was enough to make any woman cringe.

But Claire must have known something about the town before she started her trip. If Dennis Huntley had gone east to get Claire and the boy, he would have told her what to expect. And yet she had come on to be with her husband— Pete knew a sudden warmth of admiration for her.

He'd met Dennis Huntley when the

town first opened up; Huntley had been a thin, pale, sickly-looking man, with a persistent cough.

Then there was Eric Manx—Pete felt the quick flare of resentment. As the partner of Claire's late husband, he had all but taken over the family; the proud, possessive look had been sharp on his face as he drove his heavy wagon up the main street of Sugar Pine.

Restless, Cameron rolled out of bed in the dim hours before dawn, and hurried through his chores. By the time he had prepared his breakfast, light had only begun to break in the east. The two gold-red chickarees came down to sit on his window sill and scold sleepily, round-eyed in the lamp light.

And Pete caught himself thinking of little Dale Huntley and the way he had looked up in trusting wonder to Pete's face. Wait 'til the boy saw his two tame squirrels, Pete thought, and let them climb up on his shoulder and eat biscuit crumbs from his hand. This would be the place for a boy to grow up, with the clean meadows and timber and cattle—away from the drunken, roistering crowds of the boom camps, the only life Cameron had known in his own precarious youth.

And Pete knew for sure then that he was going back to town, just as soon as he could saddle a horse. He was in love with Claire Huntley; he had to admit it. Never in his life had he tried to fool himself, in trouble or out, and this was no time to start. He'd met a woman whose very presence in Sugar Pine upset his whole pattern of life, and he might as well face the truth.

Pete rode down the mountain with the thin early rays of new sun slanting over his left shoulder. He rode into town past the deep, ragged cut in solid rock where Arch Frisbie and his neighboring miners were opening a canal to turn Bitter Creek from its old, swampy and mined-out bed, into a new channel lined with ready sluiceways and heaps of gold-rich gravel. Frisbie waved to

Pete, but most of the sweating miners never looked up from their picks and bouncing drills.

PETE RODE on to the hitchrack at the Manx and Huntley Mercantile and found the doors still closed. The town of Sugar Pine had not yet wakened to full, roaring life. He stopped the first clerk to come down the sidewalk, before the man could fit his key to a lock.

"I'm lookin' for Claire—for Mrs. Huntley," he explained. "She just came to town yesterday—"

The clerk nodded. "Up there across the street—" He pointed to the steep, bare side of the granite hill. "The shack Dennis Huntley built before he went East for his family—"

Cameron left his buckskin horse and strode through the deep dust and started up the narrow path among the pine stumps and broken, straggly laurel, and the morning stirring noises of the town drifted along up with him in growing waves. It was a stiff climb up to the little cabin, and Pete found his heart pounding oddly, chokingly in his throat. With each step new doubts assailed him.

Never in his life before had he gone seriously courting, and he found him-

self worrying. Maybe Claire wouldn't even remember him from yesterday. Maybe she wouldn't consider staying in the West. Maybe she'd already seen too much of Sugar Pine. If there had been another dozen steps in the path, he'd have lost his nerve.

It was far too early in the morning to be making his call, Pete realized after he had already knocked on the pine board door. He could still back out. He turned hurriedly away, but the door was opening; and there stood Claire Huntley.

Pete caught his breath. Even with his dreams of her and his good memory for details that had long been his pride, he'd forgotten how tall she stood, the light, graceful movement of her hands, the way her long, dark-gold lashes touched the feather-soft smoothness of her cheek as she stared wide-eyed at him.

"Good-morning!" she cried. "Good-morning—Pete Cameron!"

Pete stared. She knew his name—but Eric had called him by name yesterday, he remembered. His pulse quickened again; she hadn't forgotten him!

She was wearing a blue and white house dress, all starchy-stiff and crackly when she moved. It was long-sleeved with cuffs and high-necked and full-skirted, but all the cloth and careful starching could not mask the lithe grace of her slim figure and the quick rise and fall of full-curved bosom with her hurried breathing. Claire Huntley, in plain and simple dress, had more appeal than any bright and gaudy dance-hall girl Pete had ever seen, in spite of the showgirls' daring, and false-tinsel trappings of their trade.

But what could a man say to a woman in circumstances like these? How could he make her understand the feelings that drove him to ride the rough miles and come knocking at her door almost before sun-up?

Pete turned his hat in his hands and cleared his throat. "I just came by—" he said, "to see how little Dale was makin' out. Kinda wanted to be sure he didn't get hurt yesterday—"

Claire laughed softly. It was a pleased grateful sound. "Dale is fine—won't you come in and see him? We were just having breakfast—" She held the door open for him, a quick apologetic smile on her lips. "I know it's awfully late for breakfast; but after all, the dark morning starts on the trail, we were giving ourselves this one luxury—"

"Hello, Mr. Cameron!" Dale called from his chair at the kitchen table. "Someday I'm goin' to have a gun like yours—"

"Hush, Dale!" Claire said quickly. "Won't you have coffee with us, Mr. Cameron?"

She had stopped in the kitchen doorway, and the arrangement of the narrow cabin brought her very close to him, so close that the rustle of her crisp dress, the clean starched smell, reached him plainly. He stepped back, his heart galloping, and opened his mouth to answer.

BUT A SUDDEN rippling shock-wave of concussion started through the solid granite under the house and crackled up through the floor, up the walls and along the roof, rattling each board. Claire turned white and jumped to grab wide-eyed little Dale out of his chair.

"Oh—help us, Mr. Cameron!" she cried. And she rushed to him, carrying the boy.

For a split-second, Pete knew panic. The mountain seemed to have come loose from its base, and his mind flashed to the many avalanches and rock slides he'd watched in the high country. Under a slide, this frail cabin would fold up like a cigar box under a wagon wheel; and the boy would be crushed.

He caught Dale out of her arms.

Then the sound, the shuddering roar of the explosion, slammed through the cabin, drowning all speech, and he knew what it was—only the heavy blasting of Arch Frisbie's crew down in the rocky canal at the end of the mountain. This was the first blast that had been touched off since Claire Huntley arrived in Sugar Pine!

But he couldn't explain it to her yet; he couldn't tell her so soon that there was no real danger. For Claire had her arms around both him and the boy. And as the second explosion followed the echo of the first, and then the third one came right after the second, she gripped him closer and closer until the frightened jolting of her heart reached him above the shaking of the building and stirred his pulse to quick answering rhythm.

Only when the last echo had died away did he set little Dale on his feet. "Blasting," he said then. "The diggin' crew down in the canyon. For a minute, it had me fooled—"

"But you never wavered," Claire replied quickly. "The mountain could have tipped over, and you'd have stood your ground!" The glow of admiration in her brown eyes spoke even more plainly than her words.

Cameron felt a hot flush creeping up his neck, into his cheeks. "When a man," he blurted, "is protectin' someone he loves—"

Claire started, and he saw her face color quickly. She turned and hurried Dale back into the kitchen. "Finish your breakfast," she said. "That was only blasting a long ways away—and nobody is going to get hurt!"

She came back then and motioned Pete to follow her. Outside the front door, she turned and led the way up behind the cabin to a bench in the secluded shade of a white-fir's drooping branches. She dropped to the bench and brushed away the fallen fir-needles as an invitation for Pete to join her.

"I was afraid," she said then, softly, "that you had the same feeling for me that I had for you. I could read it in your face when we met yesterday, when you watched me ride away—"

Pete's heart crowded chokingly into his throat. "You mean," he gasped, "that you—you do—you could love me?" It was like a beacon of light in a storm, like suddenly finding a bridge across an impassable river into a land of paradise!

CLAIRE smiled sadly. "The minute you ran out into the street, the way you faced that man with the whip to protect Dale— I knew I could never forget you. There's something in the way you carry your shoulders, the way you walk, that's different from other men. You won't back down and be walked over—"

Pete Cameron winced in sudden pain of conscience—he had never backed down in a gun-fight either. And it made him a killer!

"But still you're kind and gentle." Claire went on, softly, sadly. "I might learn to love you very much—but it's no use. We buried Dennis only short weeks ago on the trail—mountain fever, consumption. The memory is too fresh. And when I feel that I *can* think of marriage again—I owe a great debt to Eric Manx. He helped me with Dennis all the last month, stayed right by his side, helped me lift him, took care of Dale for me—"

"But," Cameron objected, "gratitude can't take the place of love!"

Claire turned sober brown eyes to meet his. "Eric was loyal all through the hardship of the trail, all the way. Wouldn't you want me to be loyal to him now? And he is in love with me, has already asked me to marry him."

Pete tasted the bitterness in his mouth, made even more painful by memory of the look on the face of Eric Manx as he drove his big wagon into

Sugar Pine, the pride and self-assurance of the man. Manx, Pete thought glumly, played a shrewd game!

Claire laid a gentle hand on his arm, and his pulse leapt crazily. "I'll always be grateful to you. But neither could I possibly forget Eric—"

"You'd be better off," Cameron said tightly, pouring the bitterness on himself now, for he could never turn a harsh thought against Claire. "To marry Eric Manx and forget me! I'm only a cattle-raisin' gun-slinger. The way I face things, the brave look you admired, that's only bull-headedness that won't let me back down, not any time —even when I have to kill..."

And in a wild rush of words, Pete told of the life he had known, the rough boom towns, the fights and the killings. All unconsciously, he also told of the sickness that tore his heart at every unnecessary death, every reckless life his gun had taken.

Claire placed her hand gently on his. "Don't blame yourself, Pete; if you weren't there, they'd challenge somebody else. Somebody would have to kill or be killed. And the country *will* change; as the West becomes more civilized—"

Pete caught both her hands. "I need you, Claire! Don't you see—if you could marry me, we'd live out on my ranch, away from town. It'd be perfect for Dale—" Briefly, more slowly now, he described the ranch, the pine-shaded gulch, the trout stream, the snug cabin against the high rim. "Out there," he explained, "we'd have everything! And I could stay away from saloons and the gun-happy crowd—"

There were tears in Claire's eyes, sparkling on the long, dark-gold lashes. "I wish I could, Pete; truly, I wish I could. But it can't be. You go back to your ranch, Pete—some day you'll meet somebody—" She pulled from his grip and jumped to her feet. Turning to him before he could get his feet under him to rise, she caught him around the neck and kissed him quickly, firmly on the mouth.

"Good-bye, Pete!" she cried breathlessly. And she ran down the path to the cabin, and the door slammed behind her.

Cameron sat a long moment stunned, his pulse racing, his head whirling, his breath short. Then he jumped up and started for the cabin. Gratitude be hanged—he break down the door if necessary and take her away with him. How could a skinny, round-headed, boney-shouldered prune-peddler like Eric Manx hold any claim on a girl like Claire!

But it was Claire, he remembered, who had vowed her loyalty to Manx. And Claire had said a final, "Good-bye!"

Pete strode slowly down the path, blindly across the now-crowded street, and found his horse. He could, he swore, still feel the warmth of her kiss on his lips!

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THE MINERS were drilling the granite to place another powder charge when Pete rode past the canal-cut in the rock, but he scarcely noticed. His eyes were on the stony trail leading up through the giant sugar pines to his home ranch in the gulch, and his thoughts refused to leave Claire Huntley.

She had told him firmly, definitely, that she could never marry him—not while she still owed a debt to Eric Manx. Her gratitude toward Manx, her deep sense of loyalty, only made her more desirable, more worth fighting for. A man couldn't help envying the one who had been lucky enough to earn that loyalty!

The dark thought crossed Cameron's mind—suppose something happened to Manx, an accident, a fight, anything to take him out of the picture. Pete shook his head, his mouth twisting at the unworthiness of the thought—he could never harm Eric Manx, not in the face of Claire's trust. And Manx was the kind of man who could stumble along forever without mishap.

Pete pulled his Stetson down to shield his eyes from the still-early, slanting sun and let his buckskin horse pick the way carefully, slowly up the rock-strewn trail.

Claire had told him there could be no hope—and then she had kissed him. And his desire for her had grown a hundredfold. Never, he swore, would he give her up; he'd go home now and build another room on the cabin, a room especially for the boy. He'd build a fence around the place to keep the cattle away from the door. He'd rock a canal to bring the spring water right to the house. It'd be the best mountain home a family ever had!

Pete stared up into the dark slopes of gnarled-limb pines. In vivid memory, he could still feel Claire's arms around him, the wild beating of her heart as the explosion rocked her little cabin. Up here in the gulch, she would no longer have to be afraid. There'd be no blasting, no gun-fights, no reckless, whip-swinging drivers to run down little Dale.

Once Claire could see the quiet ranch home, Pete reasoned, she would be ready to leave Sugar Pine, in spite of Eric Manx. If he could once get her away from town, get her to ride up the trail with him even as far as the break in the rim, where she could look over into the green and peaceful canyon dotted with dark pines and cedar—and his own fat Walking-O steers, she would never go back, to the rough mining town.

And he would be content here. With Claire at his side, no loneliness could touch him. There'd be no more trips to town except on hurried business and quick return. There'd be no more saloons and no more gun-fights...

A whistling bullet clipped and crackled through the pine branches and spanged into a rock by the trail, and the thin crack of a carbine followed it down through the timber to echo off the hills beyond.

Cameron ducked and touched spurs to the buckskin. That shot had come from up by the break in the rim—some fool prospector trying to pick up fresh venison for his table. They'd been ranging farther from the creek every day. It was only a matter of time until he'd have to be warning them off the ranch. There were plenty of deer in the gulch, but a lot of those heavy-handed gold-grubbers wouldn't know a buck deer from a brindle calf!

The buckskin pounded up over the rise and into the level end of the gulch, and Pete drew a sharp breath. A rider spurred ahead of him, carrying a carbine. The man was no thick-booted placer hand; he stuck to his saddle over the rough trail with the skill of a born cowpuncher!

AS PETE caught a open look at him, the man swung around and lifted his carbine. Cameron ducked as the bullet whistled back through the brush; he bared his teeth and grabbed for his Colt. But the range was too great, he knew instinctively.

Pete dropped the gun back into leather and leaned to draw his own carbine from the saddle scabbard, quick anger rising in him. Didn't the man know whose range he'd blundered on?

He levered a shell into the chamber, but the rider had ducked behind thick pines. Pete reined aside, circling high to the right of the trail for a clearer view, and a growl of wild rage rattled in his tight throat three other men on fast horses were cutting out a bunch of his best steers, hazing them toward the rough break in the north rim.

Even as he saw them, the loud bawling of cattle drifted through the pines.

Pete cursed and set spurs to his horse, reining straight on down through rocks and laurel brush. They must have had a man watching his cabin, he thought chokingly, and seen him ride off to town early and figured he'd be gone for the day. They were heading for the only other break in the wall of the gulch. But he'd stop them, he swore, if he had to crawl the high rock rim on his hands and knees!

Pete cursed and dodged the low-swinging branches. This was the first time that rustlers had invaded his quiet, secure little canyon. But he should have known—the gold camps brought the lawless from all manner of jobs. It had been only a matter of time...

A bullet whispered out of the shadows, and the buckskin horse stumbled and went down. Cameron kicked free of the stirrups and jumped clear. He turned to help the dying horse and a savage fury boiled in him, twisting his stomach sickeningly to the verge of nausea. He'd rather have taken the bullet himself than see a good horse shot down.

Behind him, a rider crashed into the open, hunting his target. Pete whirled—he'd forgotten the man who had ducked into the pines. He whipped up his carbine and fired, and the rider pitched from the saddle. Pete swallowed hard—that was evening the score!

He turned then and slammed recklessly through the brush toward the north rim, heedless of thorns and rocks and snags, his rage an inexorable force that carried him on against all obstacles. A mile of timber separated him from the break in the rim, and the horsemen moved fast. But a huge pine in his path gave him his chance. It had fallen to lodge between two others, a slippery, slanting stairway leading above the thick brush.

Pete took it at a run, risking all against time. His rush carried him up the slippery trunk to a crotch in the heavy branches, a secure foothold, and he could look out above the timber. The rustlers still rode within carbine range, crowding fat steers at a killing pace. Pete swung his carbine into a forked limb, and his first shot staggered the point rider in his saddle.

Then the man was lost in the swirling dust-cloud. Another dark horseman galloped into sight, and Pete nicked him on the third shot. The man tried to return the fire, shooting wildly through the dust, but he hadn't even located Pete. He was staring ahead, up at the break in the rim.

THE HOARSE shouting drifted to Cameron above the bawling of steers, and Pete's pulse hammered in quick exulatation. They were giving up, riding back into the gulch, leaving the cattle to scatter. Pete slid down the pine trunk and started through the rough timber at a reckless run.

Not until he had cleared the thicker brush and reached an open meadow could Pete learn where they had gone, and his hopes struck rock bottom. They had forted up in *his* cabin—smoke already spiralled up from the rocky chinmey.

The whole deal made no sense—unless his shots coming first from the southwest and then from further north had let them to believe they were surrounded. But there they were. Moving in cautiously closer, Pete could make out the carbine barrel poking out through a window where until now a precious pane of glass had kept out the storm.

Pete slumped down behind a log, discouragement robbing his strength. All the ground around the cabin had been cleared. Remembering earlier Indian troubles, he had deliberately destroyed any cover that might hide an approaching raider. But now *he* was

outside and the rustlers were in the cabin. The very protection he had devised now worked solidly against him.

Pete thought of returning to town for help, but gave it up. He had no horse, no assurance the rustlers would wait in the cabin. His only chance, he reasoned, would be to work in close, to wait and watch, and then at dusk to move in fast and shooting.

For a long, sweating hour he wriggled from stump to protecting stump. Then he had his first glimpse of the outlaws. A thin yellow-haired man started out to the spring for water. Cameron's long shot broke the man's arm near the elbow, and he dropped the water bucket. Then answering fire from the window burned a furrow the length of Pete's thigh and he could only wait while the blood clotted and died and the hot sunshine burned down on his back.

After endless, dragging, dizzying hours, the sun finally started its drop into the west and a cool breeze sprang up. More muscle-stiffening hours and dusk began to move in and build its blue shadows across the gulch. Pete moved ahead slowly, painfully.

But the rustlers had already made their play. Knowing Cameron's location, pinned behind a stump, they had moved out a back window and kept the cabin in front of them as they led their horses back to the rim and ready for a break. Pete's first inkling of a slip-up came when he saw the fire they had started to divert his attention suddenly flare into life, and his cabin was in flames.

Risking a bushwhack bullet, Pete dashed to the spring and brought water to fight the baze. But it was too far gone. He could only move back and to embers. There, he thought dismally, watch his handiwork, his home, burn sickly, there in smoking ashes lay the peace and security he had offered to Claire!

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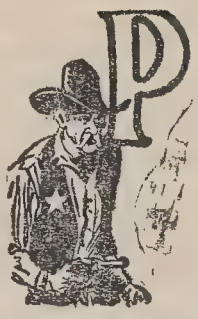

PETE SPENT the night in the haymow of his low log stable which fortunately had been far enough from the cabin that it hadn't caught fire. In the chill of the morning, he washed some of the fever out of his bullet-grooved leg at the spring and bound it up as best he could. Luckily, he had an extra pair of Levis, almost new, hanging beside the oat-bin and he could discard the pair with the torn and blood-darkened leg.

Limping and sick with the slow poison of futile rage, Pete circled the still-smoldering ashes of his cabin. It was a total loss; all of his work, all his stock of provisions, everything gone. But more than the personal loss, all his hopes, his bright dream of a safe and quiet home fo Claire and the boy had gone with it.

What had happened once could happen again. The snug, rock-rimmed, pine-shaded little gulch on the slopes of the Sierras had been invaded, its illusion of security destroyed. It had no more to offer now than the crowded, turbulent streets of the boom town of Sugar Pine!

Favoring his stiffened leg, Pete caught up his steadiest bay gelding out of the little horse pasture and tramped the rough distance down the canyon to where the buckskin had fallen, to retrieve his saddle. Once astride a horse again, his feet in the stirrups, some of the old confidence returned. His steers, he found, had been scattered all across the gulch, but none were missing. The rustlers had caught enough punishment and pulled out, taking only their dead or wounded.

Pete hazed the strays back toward better grazing and cut out a small

bunch of prime beef animals. Butcher Hans Schmidt in Sugar Pine would always buy a few more, and if Pete ever needed cash, he needed it now.

The trail down off the mountain put an added strain on Pete's leg, set every nerve on edge. By the time he reached the butchers little corral on the alley with his steers, he was seeing purple spots before his eyes. So when a stranger approached him with a hasty offer to buy out his ranch up in the gulch, he shouted the man down with a hoarse, emphatic, *"No!"*, and sent the stranger hurrying on his way.

Only later, as Pete lay back in a barber's chair, his face warm and relaxed with lather for a much-needed shave, did he stop to consider the deal. Maybe, he thought suddenly, it was exactly what he'd been waiting for. Since he had nothing up in the gulch any more to offer Claire, and here in Sugar Pine he could promise her no more quiet security than Manx could already give her, maybe this new idea was the answer. He could sell out and take Claire and Dale away with him to some peaceful, settled community and buy up another ranch for himself.

The more he thought it over, the better it seemed. His pulse hammered until the whole length of his leg throbbed with burning torture. But he crowded the pain aside as a minor annoyance and urged the barber to hurry.

All the way up to the Mercantile, Pete's heart kept crowding up into his throat, shortening his breath. He was going to see Claire Huntley again—and maybe this time she'd agree with him!

Pete started across the street from the Mercantile, heading for the little cabin that stood out plainly against the bare hillside, but his nerve failed him. He turned back. This might be the last chance, he realized, and he hadn't yet figured what he would say.

RESTLESSLY, he strode into the big, bustling, merchandise-crowded store, filled with all the many colors and haunting sells from all parts of the nation, all corners of the world. The dye-scent of blue denim and the linseed-rich, shiny oilcloth vied with the smell of harness oil and brown sugar and dried apricots, with salt-pickles and cheese and steel bear traps—and all the pervading kerosene. It was a three-dimension catalogue of the civilization beyond the hills.

And there at the drygoods counter stood Claire Huntley. She was wearing a dark dress now, simple and plain, but even more attractive, Pete vowed, than he'd ever seen.

She saw Pete and came at once to meet him. "Hello. Pete!" she said softly, her eyes alight. "I'm surprised to see you in town again so soon!"

Pete swallowed twice before he found his voice. "I want to talk to you, Claire—"

Claire Huntley glanced around quickly. "Not here—come on into the office." She turned and led the way past the notion counter and through a narrow door. "Mr. Hanson," she said to the bookeeper, "would you please go down to the stage station and see if the mail has come in?"

The thin, pale-cheeked man nodded. He removed his green eyeshade and hurried out.

Claire dropped into a big swivel-chair by the desk and motioned Pete to the second chair. "It isn't good for you to come here, Pete," she said, her brown eyes sober. "Not good for either of us!"

"I had to see you, Claire! I can't go on livin' in this town alone—just you and little Dale. Even up at the ranch ain't safe enough. I want to take you away—" And breathlessly, hopefully, he told of the stranger's offer to buy him out, his own idea of a new, secure home in some quiet, settled community, maybe a ranch in a new location.

The sadness grew in Claire's eyes and again moisture stood on her long

dark-gold lashes. "It's wonderful of you to think so much of us, Pete—but I could never leave Sugar Pine. Dennis—my husband—left me a half-interest in this store. It was his wish that I carry on for him and keep it Manx and Huntley Mercantile. He had faith that it would be very valuable some day, that it would support Dale and me. And I too have faith in the store and the town—"

"But you wouldn't have to sell out," Cameron objected. "You could keep your interest—"

Claire shook her head. "Then there's Eric. I tried to explain to you why I can't forget Eric, Pete. I owe him too much."

At the mention of Manx, Pete felt a desperate bitterness rising in him. For Claire's sake he tried to keep it out of his eyes. It did no good.

"Eric is like a new man," Claire went on, "since he feels he can count on me. He's working like a madman to be a success, both here in the store and in half-dozen new enterprises. I couldn't let him down! He's even going into a big mining venture high up on Bitter Creek with a Mr. Tyle, a business he says will make him the biggest man in town—"

Pete choked. "Anybody doin' business with Lew Tyle ends up gettin' hurt!" He stood up and paced the floor, stiff-legged.

Claire bit her lip. "I can understand your bitterness, Pete," she said softly; "and I'm sorry. But I don't think you need to concern yourself with Eric's safety. He can take care of himself."

"Maybe!" Pete countered. "He don't even wear a gun!"

An odd light crept into Claire's brown eyes. "Yes," she said pointedly. "Eric doesn't wear a gun."

PETE FELT the hot color darkening his cheeks. "And I do! Is that it? Is that what makes him so much better than I am? Maybe you think I oughta hang up my gun, go around bare-handed—"

"Maybe," Claire admitted, a trace of sob in her voice. "How many times is an unarmed man ever challenged to a gun-fight?"

"And what if he was?" Pete argued hotly. "Who's to know the answer when they drag him out feet first?"

Claire looked up to meet his eyes. "Your gun is your only faith, isn't it, Pete?" She pressed the back of her hand to her forehead. "I'm sorry, Pete—you'd better go now—"

Pete Cameron stood staring at the woman in the dark dress, and his heart was a solid, violent ache beating at his throat. *Claire,* he wanted to cry out. *Claire Huntley—I love you more than my own life!* If he could only take her in his arms, he thought. If he could only feel her lips on his once more and know that at least in a small measure she cared for him. But an impenetrable wall had sprung up between them. There was no longer any way he could reach her.

"Yeah." he gritted. "I'd better travel. Seems like I been tryin' to put my stakes down on the wrong claim!"

He spun around and elbowed through the door and strode on past the notion counter, out through the crowds to the dusty sunshine of the street. And the ache in his throat still choked his breath.

What would Claire think of Eric's big deal, he wondered, if she knew that the "Mr. Tyle" he'd teamed with was the same whip-handed driver who would have risked running down her young son without a backward glance! Pete cursed under his breath—he should have called Lew Tyle's hand, he swore, right there in the street when he had rescued little Dale!

But that would have meant a gun-fight, a killing—because Pete always wore his gun. And Claire preferred harmless, empty-handed Eric Manx...

The office of the town marshal stood

just beyond the stage depot. Pete was unbuckling his gun-belt as he kicked open the door and faced Marshal Everett Goss at his desk

"Marshal Goss," Pete called huskily, "a while back, you had a law that every man had to check his gun when he came to town—"

The lawman pushed himself up to his feet. "We cut that out over two months ago—you know that, Pete. Never could make it stick—"

"I'm callin' on you to enforce that law, Marshal. And I'm handin' you my gun."

"Hold on, Pete! You gone loco? I ain't even tryin' to enforce that rule. All it got me was trouble—the honest hands turned in their hardware and the crooked hombres sneaked by. Besides, I blame near got myself shot!"

Pete dumped heavy holster and belt on the Marshal's desk. "I'll pick 'em up on my way outa town—"

"Now hold on!" Goss repeated. "You can't do that. Pete! I hear talk that Lew Tyle is gunnin' for you—says you called him down in the public street. If you go walkin' around town—"

"I'm unarmed," Pete stated. "It's your job, Goss, to make sure no unarmed man gets shot down. It's your *duty*—so have at it!"

HE TURNED and strode from the building and out onto the busy sidewalk. For a moment he had the feeling he'd left off part of his clothes. He felt naked. For a moment near-panic seized him and he started to turn back. Then he forced himself to steady down, to look around him. Two men out of every three wore no guns or shell-belts. *They* went casually about their chores. *They* showed no fear, no concern. If it could be done, he swore, for Claire's sake, *he* could do it!

He strode on, awkwardly, uneasily. This was the first time, he realized, since he'd been old enough to lift the weight of a sixgun that he'd been without one. And yet in all that time he had hated the weapon, hated the terrible need for it, the killing it brought. Maybe, he thought, with a faint ray of hope, this *could* work out. Maybe Claire instinctively knew the truth that he had never been able to learn!

Pete headed deliberately for *Heinrick's Bar,* his confidence growing. But at the corner he looked ahead to see Lew Tyle's buggy crossing the main street, and a chill slowed his pulse. Would arrogant, thick-jawed Tyle balk at shooting an unarmed man?

Unconsciously, Pete hugged the store-front as the buggy passed. Then he caught a glimpse of the man who rode with Tyle. Something familiar about the thin, hunched figure caught his eye. The man had his hat pulled low, his face hidden, but he carried his right arm in a sling.

Pete's blood pounded in wild suspicion—that could be one of the rustlers, the man with the water bucket that Pete had winged! If Lew Tyle was back of that job—but Pete had no gun and he couldn't be sure. He had to let the buggy drift on out of sight among the freight wagons. Swallowing through a dry throat, he limped across the street to *Heinrick's.*

Inside the saloon, Pete had his second moment of panic as the loafers and hangers-on looked him over and lips curled in open disbelief. If they said one word, he vowed, if they made one belittling remark, he'd work the whole crowd over with his bare fists. But no one spoke except the bartender, and his was a casual, normal greeting.

Pete ordered his drink, and the whiskey burned rawly in his throat, but is eased the tension in him. The second drink, and he could look around him without self-consciousness, forgetting his empty belt. He spoke to a faro dealer he had known and to the derelic piano player. He laid his money on the bar and started for the swinging doors. Then the trouble started.

A LANKY, pimpled-faced youth staggered through the doors, almost too far gone in liquor to stand alone. Two gun-smart young drifters helped him get his balance, pointed to Cameron, and ducked back out and away.

The young puncher drew his gun. "Pete Cameron," he lisped drunkenly. "I'm goin' shoot you—." He raised the gun and fired at Pete. Pete ducked. The bartender and half-dozen customers also ducked. The bullet smashed a fancy bottle of brandy on the high backbar shelf.

"Fuzzy Potter!" somebody yelled. "Hold your fire! Pete ain't wearin' a gun—"

"Think I'm drunk, huh?" Potter reported querulously. "Show you I can beat ol' Pete Cameron in a fair shootin'—"

He triggered again. Pete ducked aside. In two strides, Pete covered the distance and struck Fuzzy Potter on the point of the chin and lifted the smoking gun out of his hand.

This would never happen, Pete thought angrily, if the Marshal *had* enforced his laws! He turned to hand the gun to the bartender for safe-keeping, but somebody yelled a warning. Pete spun around. Potter had the second gun, a hideaway, out in his hand and pointing at Pete's belt buckle. And the boy's eyes, jarred sober, glittered with killer light. This bullet wouldn't miss!

Instinctively, Pete swung the gun in his hand and snapped a hasty shot. He aimed for Potter's weapon. The bullet struck it's mark and knocked the gun aside as it fired; but the heavy slug glanced off the metal and tore on through the young puncher's chest, and Fuzzy Potter gasped out his life on the barroom floor.

Sick to the point of nausea, Pete shouldered into the street and headed for the Marshal's office.

- 5 -

FOR TWO dismal, indecisive hours Pete Cameron rode the dim and shadowy trails above the town, his Colt again at his side. He let his horse choose the easiest, the darkest, path among the pines, while helpless anger churned inside him, tangling and snarling his thoughts.

Once he looked out of a thick pine grove to see rows of miners sweating over gold-pan and sluice box along the lower creek, and again, higher up, he saw labor crews starting work on a dam across a narrow, deep gorge in the canyon. But they could mean little to him. He was slowly, tortuously, reaching a decision.

At last he reined back toward town, and the pent-up forces in him drove him with all the violence of a dry-season brush-fire. He broke through the middle of a pack train and crowded past carts and wagons to reach the hitchrack by the Mercantile.

He caught a glimpse of Claire hurrying across the street, starting up the path to her own cabin on the hillside. Pete took the hill at a jarring run and caught up with her at the cabin door. Claire backed against the door, bracing her hands on the door frame, apprehension in her eyes at the looks of him.

"Pete," she whispered. "What—why have you come back?"

Pete stood, feet braced apart, staring down at her, while the hot blood pounded through him and threatened his resolution.

"I'm going away, Claire," he said finally, gruffly. "I can't stay here—in the same town—" He caught a choking breath. "I tried takin' off my

gun—I left my Colt with the Marshal. Then I had to shoot a drunken kid his own iron." Pete swallowed hard. "I tried, Claire—for your sake, I tried; but it won't work. I sellin' my ranch. Pullin' outa town—"

Claire looked up into his face, eyes shiny-moist. "Maybe it is best, Pete—"

Staring down at her, at the light in her brown eyes, the whisper-touch of long lashes on smooth cheek, the soft curve of chin and throat, Pete's blood raced wildly in his veins. He reached quickly and caught her in his arms and pulled her close and kissed her forehead, her lips, the smooth curve of her neck. With a quick sob of breath then, he set her on her feet and spun blindly away. And no protest came from the woman he was leaving, no parting word—only the faint, anguished whisper of his name as he plunged down the hill and into the noisy, crowded thoroughfare.

Pete slammed through the crowd, and the churning anger was with him again, riding his shoulder like the demon of death.

Eric Manx came shambling out through the door of the Mercantile, his boney shoulders hunched, his round head thrust forward, the sun in his light fuzzy hair. He nodded to Pete and stepped aside to brush on past. But Cameron squarely blocked his way.

"Manx!" Pete gritted, eyes smoldering. "Does Claire Huntley know the man you're teamin' up with is the same polecat, Lew Tyle, who tried to run down her son?"

Color flooded into the man's hollow cheeks. "My business outside the store is no concern of hers," he countered. "At least not yet; and it's blamed well no concern of yours either!"

Pete bared his teeth in a grimace of disgust. "You're the tough hombre who said Lew Tyle ought to be horsewhipped—"

Manx swallowed. "A man can't let his personal feelings interfere with business. This is a big enterprise—a cooperative plan that'll help every miner in the canyon. I gotta go now and see—" He tried to slide past along the store front.

Cameron grabbed him by the shirt and slammed him up against the building so fast that the boards rattled. "I don't care where you gotta go," he growled; "or who you gotta see. If you ever let a mite of harm come to Claire Huntley, or her boy, I'll ride back here and tear you in two with my bare hands!"

He loosed his hold on Manx then and let the shaking storekeeper slump down against the boards. Without a backward glance, he caught up the reins at the hitchrack and swung astride his horse and rode down the street.

HANS SCHMIDT, the butcher, remembered the man who had offered to buy Pete's ranch, remembered he'd seen him at the *Double Eagle*. Pete caught the man coming out through the double doors.

"You made me an offer," Pete challenged, "for my outfit up in the gulch. You musta been locoed or jokin'—"

"No,' the man protested. "I was plumb serious—"

"If you mean business, come up and see what you're buyin'. And bring along double the price you offered—cash money!"

The man rubbed his moist brow and glanced quickly up and down the street. "Afraid I can't go that steep—but I'll be up there—before dark. And I'll bring the cash—"

Pete rode up the steep trail through the pines. It was the last time, he realized, but he tried not to think of it. The sooner he could wash the slow, poisonous, futile anger out of his system and forget the gulch and the town of Sugar Pine—and Claire.

He had the cattle rounded up at the head of the gulch and his horses in the corral by the time the buyer arrived.

"Everything goes but the horse I'm ridin'," he offered.

The buyer looked the stock over, and they agreed on a price. The man dug out folding money for payment and took his bill of sale.

"When you rebuild the cabin," Pete suggested, "you might want to locate it a trifle closer to the spring. Save carryin'—"

The buyer shrugged. "Let the new owner figure it out. I'm not buyin' the ranch for myself."

A jolt of suspicion struck Pete, set his pulse hammering. "Who," he queried roughly, "*are* you buyin' for?"

The man's eyes went flat. He folded the bill of sale and tucked it into his pocket and reached for the reins of his sorrel saddle horse. Then he replied, casually, "Lew Tyle."

The sudden pounding of blood to Pete's head threw a red haze across his vision. His throat contracted. His right hand shook, itching to grasp the smooth, cold butt of his Colt and drive searing lead through the heart of this stranger who had tricked him. Only by effort of will did he check himself and turn away, to walk stiffly to the shelter of the stable.

And the force of his own rage shocked him, sickened him. Was he, he worried, sinking so low as to be a cold-blooded murderer?

- 6 -

PETE STABLED his horse and spent the night in the quiet of the haymow that had been his, in the barn he had built. And now that the deal was over and done, he could consider it soberly; he had been neither cheated nor deceived, he realized. He had offered the ranch for sale, and a man had met his price. Whether the man's name was Lew Tyle or Jiminy Cricket made no difference. Actually, Cameron remembered, he hadn't even bothered to fill in the name on the bill of sale, it was that unimportant.

It had been the shock of learning the buyer that had jolted him. After dodging Lew Tyle and the crippled-arm puncher on the street and hearing his name from both the Marshal and Eric Manx, it had seemed almost as though stocky, thick-jawed, pale-eyed Lew Tyle himself had suddenly appeared to drive him from the gulch that had been his safe and quiet home.

Pete looked around at the half-empty haymow and out the narrow window to where a rising moon silvered the ashes of the cabin. Tyle had paid a good price for the ranch. It was well stocked with cattle, but Pete had sold off the prime steers. Tyle had parted with plenty of cash for what was left!

Pressing the roll of folding money in his pocket, Pete grinned to himself—then a sudden new chill of suspicion slowed his pulse. The buyer had met his price too soon, with too little argument. Tyle would never let a man he'd hired hand out that kind of money without a stiff fight, not unless he intended to get it back. That could be the real answer back of the deal!

Pete swallowed, his throat dry. He drew his Colt out of the holster and placed it carefully by his hand and lay very still in the hay. Hidden by shadows, he could watch the window and the stable door, and the full moon gave ample light. Luckily, he thought, he'd turned his horse out into the little pasture. A man would have a rough time approaching the silent stable without being heard.

He had been underestimating Lew Tyle, he realized. From the moment he had dashed out to save little Dale Huntley from the risk of Tyle's brutal, senseless driving, Tyle had marked him

for the kill. And Pete had called Lew Tyle's bluff there on the public road, had made the man back down and show his yellow streak. It was more than any man could take without a fight.

But gambler-promoter Tyle didn't risk his thick, white-collared neck in a common gun-fight. His methods were more crafty, more deceptively certain, and especially safer for Lew Tyle.

The rustling attempt, Cameron remembered, had all the marks of Tyle planning; and the man with his arm in a sling *had* to be the same outlaw Pete had winged from behind a stump. It all began to add up. Maybe even the needless death of young Fuzzy Potter, Pete thought, looking back, had been a part of Tyle's scheme. If ever again he happened to meet the two gun-toting young drifters who had shoved Potter into the saloon...

The night hours slipped silently past, and the moon coasted down into the west. At last came the faint pink glow of dawn, and Pete moved carefully out to the spring and filled his canteen. He caught up his horse and threw on the saddle. But he waited there in the shadow of the barn, his empty stomach growling in protest, until the first rays of sun glittered on the high rim.

He rode out then, while shadow still dimmed the floor of the gulch. He rode at a gallop, his carbine in his hand, straight for the gap in the north rim and the trail to Narsville.

The response came immediately. Sunlight glinted on steel high up on the south rim as two men who had been watching the Sugar Pine trail ran for their horses. Over on the north rim, a single carbine barrel gleamed in the sun. Pete bared his teeth in a mirthless grin—they had bet two-to-one on Sugar Pine!

PETE HELD his course through the dappled shadow of open pines until the first whitish puff of smoke lifted from the north rocks. The bullet fell short even as he reined up and jumped to the shelter of a tree. He raised his sights to the last notch and answered the fire. The range was still far too great.

Ducking back, he swung to the saddle and reined a zig-zag path through the dewy brush for heavier timber. A lone bullet snicked through the pine-needles like a lost meteor above his head.

He pounded into the open three hundred yards nearer the rim, well up in the break. And there stood the sniper in plain sight on a bare ledge, searching for him. The man backed frantically for cover, firing as he went.

Pete lifted in his stirrups and swung his carbine on the rim. Shooting from a running horse was nine-tenths luck—but on the third shot the man stumbled and went down, gripping his leg.

Pete set his teeth and touched spurs to the horse. Already he could catch sounds of pursuit behind him and he had to choose the location himself for his next stand.

Just beyond the crest of the pass the trail dipped sharply downward, swinging left and on down the mountain. Pete reined to the right, crowding the surprised horse up a narrow deer trail to the thin ledge of another rim-rock above the next canyon. A hundred yards, and he reined up. He could hear the clatter of shod hooves in the break, coming up into the pass.

He slid from the saddle and rested his carbine over a downed tree as the first rider burst into sight. Aiming carefully, he slammed a warning shot into the rocks just above the man's head.

But the rider wouldn't scare. He answered with a shot so close that it raised bark off the log at Pete's elbow. Pete bared his teeth, his pulse pound-

ing, and shot the carbine out of the man's hands.

But now the second rider was in the fight. His bullet tore Cameron's right jacket sleeve at the shoulder and spooked Pete's horse with flying bark from the pine behind him. As the horse snorted and whinnied, Pete threw a hasty shot, and the man stiffened and pitched from the saddle.

A cold knot twisted in Pete's stomach as he reloaded his carbine. "Take that story home to your boss!" he gritted, watching the first rider turn back to help his fallen partner. "Next I hope it's Lew Tyle himself—"

When the men had ridden back into the gulch—one strapped across his saddle—Pete moved on along the narrow rim. A mile further ahead he found a ledge that led him down to the timbered slopes and the open trail.

Pete rode into Narsville at noon, and the old sickness, the old bitterness, ride with him. The best day of his life, he swore, would be the day he saw the last of this raw and reckless country where a man could only keep himself alive by spilling human blood!

He rode straight to the livery stable. "Take good care of my horse," he ordered. "If I'm not back here in a year, he's yours for the feed bill!"

PETE HAD only time to satisfy his own hunger at the Chinese restaurant on the pole-and-canvas main street before the stage pulled in and he found himself in the swaying coach wedged between a fat Eastern drummer and a silent, bearded mountain man. Opposite him, three gaily-dressed Mexican caballeros chatted constantly in their own tongue.

As the coach bounced down through the dry foothills on the narrow road to the junction at Onyx, Pete stared out over the chaparral slopes, the last fringe of the mountains he was leaving. When he reached Onyx, he could take the east-bound stage over the pass, or he could continue on across the wide, dry valleys to the coast. It was a decision he would have to make.

Going east, he would cross the rough mountains and grass-and-sagebrush flats, the scattered, countless rocky hills of Nevada, the land he had already known. He had ranged into Idaho on the north, and south into Arizona's timbered heights and low, baking deserts. He had even ventured once into Utah's slopes and ridges and alkali flats. But beyond that lay the unknown, the great expance of land rolling away to the much-spoken-of East.

He couldn't judge the East by greenhorns who came from there, he reasoned. The greater number of men he knew also came from the East, quiet, efficient men who gave no indication that they were strangers to a new land. But where in the East, Cameron wondered, would he ever fit? Where would he find his place?

Maybe he should go on to the west coast, on to San Francisco and city civilization—and the vast Pacific Ocean. He might find a new life on the coast, but would he ever lose the aching bitterness that still gripped him? Where, east or west, would life be worth while without Claire Huntley?

The stage lumbered up the last stiff grade on the Onyx road, but ahead of them a loaded ore wagon came bounding downhill, the teams out of control, running away. The stage driver yelled and swung sharply to the right, cutting up into the chaparral. The lone passenger on top dove for the brush.

Inside the coach, the derby-hatted drummer clawed for the door and flopped through into the roadside dust. The three Mexicans jammed in the narrow door, all yelling. Then the heavy wagon lurched by and took the rear wheel of the stage along with it, a splintered tangle, and the coach

swung broadside in the road and rolled over.

Pete crawled up out of the wreck, the bearded mountain man right behind him, both unscratched. Together they helped one of the Mexicans drag his unconscious companions out into the shade and revive them with water from somebody's canteen. Then the whole dusty, shaken-up party walked on over the hill to Onyx.

The company agent at the stage station had been sampling a bottle most of the day, but he could still make himself understood. His was the worst job in the West, he confided to anybody who would listen. The eastbound stage had been held up by a washout over in the valley. The stage from Sugar Pine had simply been held up. And now the Narsville coach would have to wait over for repairs. And he had a station full of restless passengers.

"Make yourselves to home, boys!" he invited caustically. "Just make yourselves to home!"

PETE LOOKED around the dim, low-ceiling, crowded building. The air was thick as river-fog with tobacco smoke and crackled with discordant voices. But there was no place else a man could go for the night—the station and open shed stable and two or three crude shacks made up the junction town of Onyx.

Restless, Cameron worked his way back through the crowd. The place had a bar across the back of the room and half a dozen busy, battered poker tables. A small, thin, pale-skinned man at the first table caught Pete's experienced eye. The way the man's thin hands nervously shuffled the cards, the angle of his gun in a belt-high, cross-draw holster, the light in his pale eyes, all indicated the professional gunman, the natural killer.

Pete settled his back against the wall and watched the game. It helped to pass the time. The agent had only now applied a shaky match to the hanging lamps as darkness settled outside.

Before many hands had been played out, the fortunes of the game began to show. The small man—Little Nick, they called him—held all the good cards. The money drifted his way, a large enough pile to tempt a hold-up, Pete figured. But Little Nick wasn't alone, he discovered, letting his gaze sweep the crowd. A tall, silent Mexican stood across the room. His eyes never left the crowd at Nick's table. And he kept one brown hand close to his holstered gun.

Pete felt the angry quickening of his pulse. Trouble could break out here at the drop of a sombrero, and he wanted no part of it. He moved to edge past a chair and head for the bar. But the little man's eyes were on him, glittering reptile eyes.

"You don't care for the way I deal the cards," Nick accused, still looking straight at Pete.

Cameron shrugged. "No concern of mine."

"You figure I dealt that last one off the bottom of the deck," Nick persisted.

A hot flush crept up Pete's neck. "Forget it, stranger!" he gritted. "I wasn't even lookin' at you—"

"You're a liar!" Nick shouted. And his hand was already bringing up his cross-draw gun.

The man directly in front of Pete had left his chair at the first hint of trouble and dove for the floor. Pete saw the weapon, saw his own disadvantage against the wall with his Colt in a low-slung holster. Desperately, he hooked his boot in the chair and kicked it up at the gambler. The force sent splintered chair and table edge into the man's chest as he fired, and the bullet slapped the wall over Pete's head.

Pete had his Colt out then in his right hand. He jumped forward and

rapped the barrel alongside the smaller man's head and spilled him out of his chair. Then he whirled to face the gambler's partner, the silent Mexican.

The Mexican's shot was already on its way—the bullet burned the hair above Pete's left ear. Pete swung his gun and drilled the Mexican dead-center.

OTHER WEAPONS were showing. The bartender reached for a sawed-off shotgun. Pete snapped a shot to smash each hanging lamp and dove straight through the howling crowd to reach the back door. He missed it in the dark by three feet and slammed up against the corner of the bar with a rib-cracking jolt. He felt the bar give away as he fell and rolled past it and plunged on out into the cleaner darkness of outdoors.

He was on his feet, heading for the deep shadow of the stable, his ribs paining with every breath, when he felt the tugging jolt, the blistering bite of lead high in the muscle of his left arm, and the flat concussion of the shot reached him. He whirled to see Little Nick, his head bloody in the flickering light of a match somebody had struck just inside the door.

Pete loosed a quick shot and saw the man stagger. But Nick's gun belched new fire, and Pete's right ribs caved in as though mule-kicked. Pete dropped to his knees and leveled his gun at the man's belt and watched the shock double him over in the dirt.

Pete started away then, crawling, holding his breath. But a lantern swung out the door, and Pete sidled under a low bush in the shadow, waiting, teeth clenched to hold onto consciousness.

"Great Jupiter!" a man exclaimed. "Little Nick and the Mex both done for! And Nick never told me the message to take back to that feller in Sugar Pine—that feller Lew Tyle—"

Pete cursed softly, choking, and crawled on into the darkness.

- 7 -

FOR FIVE quiet weeks Pete lived in a little rock-and-pole shanty beside a tiny trickle of clear-water stream in the hills back of Onyx. For five weeks he never went near the town or the stage road, never saw another human being except old Zach Jessup, who owned the shanty, and a Mexican named Manuel who came to see Zach.

For some reason that Cameron never learned, Zach, too, stayed away from town and sent Manuel for all supplies. It was a simple, idyllic life, free from hurry or strain.

At first Pete had been almost helpless. Zach had found him at daylight, crawling through the hay field in front of the shanty, weak from loss of blood and two ribs broken. He had to call on Manuel to help get Pete into the house.

But Zach had been a good nurse and a good cook, and the ribs had healed fast. By the end of the five weeks, Pete helped put up the hay out of that same field where he'd been found.

Pete had intended, as soon as he was able, to walk down to the road beyond Onyx and catch the stage to the coast. He had almost made up his mind. Zach Jessup had other ideas. Zach hinted several times, in his quiet, word-sparing way, that with a small outlay of work, they could add a room on the shanty and have plenty of space for two. And a checker game on long winter evenings beat poker-deck solitaire.

Manuel put in his word. "Next month we have *mucho carne*. Fresh meat. You and me—we go hunt the deer—" And he motioned to the slopes back of the shanty.

But Pete could make no decision.

When he considered the west coast and San Francisco, it was an empty, barren thought. And to stay here at the shanty—in every cloud, in every shadow-shape in the changing light pattern on the chaparral, Pete saw the delicate lines, the gentle curves of Claire Huntley's face. Her voice was in the ripple of the stream, and in every changing reflection on the water he saw her slim, lithe figure, and husky little Dale at her side.

Starting the sixth week, Cameron could hold out no longer. He told Zach at the breakfast table the day after they had finished the haying. Zach shook his head, silently, sadly, and wrapped up a batch of *tortillas* and beans for Pete to take with him.

Zach not only refused any hint of payment for his help and hospitality; he even insisted on lending Pete his only saddle horse and he sent Manuel along as far as Narsville to bring the horse back when Pete had located his own mount. Never in his life, Pete decided, had he known two better men—nor two with less material wealth!

Pete rode into the town of Sugar Pine at sundown and straight to the Mercantile hitchrack to leave his horse. His heart in his tight throat, he took the steep hill path two steps at a time and banged on Claire's cabin door.

The door opened only an inch to show Claire's frightened face. Then she saw Cameron, and she flung the door wide and threw herself into his arms.

"Pete!" she sobbed. "Pete—Pete!" Bright tears gathered on her long lashes and spilled down her cheeks. "Pete—I've worried about you—" She drew back to look at him. "Pete—you've been hurt! You've suffered! I can see it in your face—"

Pete shook his head. "I'm here now—" He kissed her lips and kissed away the tears on her cheeks. "I'm here—and I'm stayin'!"

Claire clung to him, returning his kisses. "Pete—I've missed you so much!"

THEN ABRUPTLY she drew away, infinite sadness in her eyes. "But I'm wrong to do what I'm doing. I'm only hurting you—hurting myself. We have no right—" She brushed her hand across her brow. "Forgive me, Pete—you'll think I'm nothing but a Jezebel—" She swallowed chokingly. "I let Eric set the date for our marriage—"

Pete reeled back. "You—you and Eric Manx!"

"Oh, Pete—what could I do? I had sent you away. I never heard from you, couldn't even know if you were alive. There were such terrible stories going around! And I couldn't put Eric off—not with owing him a greater debt than I can ever pay—"

Cameron felt the chill seep through all his veins, and his newly-healed ribs began to ache. "I'm sorry," he said stiffly. "I didn't know. Sorry I busted in here like I did—"

Claire's mouth tightened in anguish. "Don't be sorry, Pete! If only you hadn't been gone so long! I've needed you—so very much!" She came a step closer, her brown eyes wide, serious. "You were right to warn me about Eric's partner up at the dam. Pete—he's the same brutal driver who almost ran over Dale!"

Fresh anger sharpened Pete's pulse at mention of Lew Tyle. He glanced hastily around the room. "Where *is* Dale, Claire?"

Claire started, then shook her head, remembering. "He's with Eric. He often goes riding with Eric in the buggy—"

"You mean," Pete exploded, "that you let Manx take the boy out there with Lew Tyle after what happened on the street?"

"Oh, no!" Claire corrected quickly. "Eric promised me he'd never let Dale come near the dam. Dale only goes with him on some of his errands in the

safer part of town. He loves to ride in the buggy with Eric—and remember, Pete, Eric is going to be Dale's stepfather. He's been almost like a real father to him since way back on the trail, months ago, when—" Tears choked Claire's voice. "Please don't worry about Dale, Pete—"

The muscles tightened around Cameron's mouth; he could feel the cold bitterness crowding up in him. "I've got to be shovin' along," he said gruffly. "Got to see to my chores—" He swung around and started through the door. "Best of luck to yuh, Claire!"

"Wait!" Claire caught his arm, and her fingers bit into the flesh. "Pete—what are you going to do now? With your ranch sold and gone? You can't go away again—"

Pete shrugged restlessly. "I'll find something—still got the money Tyle paid me for the outfit. I'll look around—" He broke away and strode down the path. He had to put distance behind him, he realized. He had to get away from Claire, away for the town. If he waited another minute, if he so much as looked back to see her standing there, he couldn't trust his will. He'd do something reckless, make a plain fool of himself.

He hurried to his horse, half running, but tall, pale, square-faced Arch Frisbie, leader of the miners along the lower creek, waited for him, blocking his path.

"Howdy, Arch," Pete greeted the man reluctantly. "How's minin'?"

"Fair, Pete—just fair. Sure glad to see you back in town, Pete. We need you. We're headin' for trouble with that outfit up at the dam—"

Pete crowded impatiently past the miner. "You and your men can handle Lew Tyle, Arch. He wouldn't have a chance against all you fellers workin' together—" Cameron grabbed up the reins. The way he felt now, it made no difference to him who dammed up Bitter Creek or dammed the whole canyon. Once he hit the road, they could flood the town of Sugar Pine for all he cared!

BUT FRISBIE crowded after him, his brow furrowed. And Pete had known Arch as a loyal friend for many past months. Pete hesitated and turned back to face the miner. No matter how pressing a man found his own problems, he couldn't forget his friends!

"That's just the trouble, Pete!" Frisbie was saying. "We did have a blamed fine bunch of men workin' together a while back. We blasted out that rock canal and figured we was headin' for the big pay-off. Then the water began to run a mite low, and Tyle and Manx came around and talked half the boys into putting up money to build a big dam high up in the canyon. Claimed they could control the flow of water and spread it even throughout the year. A cooperative plan, they called it—"

Pete scowled. "Except for Tyle's name in it, the idea sounds good."

"But Tyle *is* in it, Pete—clear up to the tips of his pointed ears! He got himself elected president and general manager of the whole shebang. And now he's collectin' a fee from every man below the dam that's usin' Bitter Crick water!"

"Hold on, Arch! You men got your water rights—"

"Rights, be hanged! It's pay up or get a busted jaw!"

"Where's the town marshal all this time? Everett Goss don't draw his pay to keep a chair warm—"

"We got no marshal, Pete. Goss was shot down day before yesterday in the *Double Eagle Saloon.*" Frisbie hesitated. "That's what I meant, Pete—we need you here. We want you to take the job."

Cameron started, his pulse thumping. "Hold on, Arch—you got the wrong man! I'm no law-rodder; I got places to go—"

"Lew Tyle," Frisbie went on, "is

backin' fancy Bart Wipple for the job. Tyle wants the whole town in his fat grip. But we've got to beat him; we've got to have a man we can trust."

Pete backed up against his horse and reached for the saddle horn. "Not me, Arch! I'm leavin'—" Then he saw Claire Huntley. She had followed him down the hill, across the road.

She stood at Arch Frisbie's elbow. "I heard what Mr. Frisbie said, Pete," she explained quietly. "Please take the job. Stay here in Sugar Pine—"

Pete's breath choked off short. "But you told me yourself, Claire, that I oughta hang up my gun, keep from killin'—"

"And you couldn't, Pete; it didn't work out. But behind a Marshal's badge will be different. They'll all have fair warning!"

Pete's heart pounded. Maybe, he thought, just maybe it might be the answer...

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AS MARSHAL of Sugar Pine, Pete Cameron learned a whole new set of values, and he learned them fast. The badge *did* make a difference, he discovered. It set him apart from friend and enemy alike; from this point on he walked alone.

The job had its good features—he was no longer a common cowpuncher with a sixgun reputation, to be challenged by any punk kid who needed to bolster his drunken ego. Now he was the law; you didn't unlimber your gun at the law without risk of seeing your face on the next set of wanted posters.

Of course a shrewd man could figure a way to shoot down the Marshal, but it took scheming and patience—more time and trouble than it was worth to the run-of-the-mill gun-happy drifter. The badge ruled out the beginners; it left Pete to face only the strictly top-money killers.

But then there were chances for accidents. Every time he had gone into some smoky back-room whiskey-mill to arrest a locoed, gun-swinging puncher or a drunken, knife-wielding Mexican—every time he thought it over afterward, he realized how close it had been, how little his life had been worth at any one particular minute. And he began to understand why the late Marshal Everett Goss leaned back in his creaking swivel chair and lit his pipe—and waited to identify the victims after the dust had settled.

In a way it was a thankless job. They hooted the Marshal when he stopped a good fight, and they cursed him if he didn't. But the job gave Pete his excuse to stay in Sugar Pine, and he had to admit to himself, when he looked back over his sudden decision to become a lawman, that the chance to remain here, closer to Claire Huntley, had been the only real inducement.

It could have been a mistake, Pete reasoned. Being here in the same town, meeting Claire on the street every day, exchanging hurried, poignent greetings with her, made her lot no easier. It created a difficult situation for both of them. But no force on earth could drag him away from town now. He had to know first-hand, each day, that Claire and Dale were still safe.

How Eric Manx felt about the new Marshal, Cameron couldn't be sure. He seldom saw Manx, and then only from a distance. But Manx was associated with Lew Tyle, working hand-in-glove with the thick-jawed promoter up at the big dam, even to the point of neglecting the Mercantile store, and Pete had no illusions about Tyle.

The man had made no open move against Cameron since his return, but Pete could hardly forget the bush-

whack deal up in the gulch or the mysterious link with Little Nick at Onyx. And then there was Bart Wipple, the lean, hard-featured, black-whiskered gunman whom Tyle had tried to shove into the Marshal's job.

Pete had never been quite sure how he'd been spirited into the law-job ahead of Tyle's man; he'd been content to let Arch Frisbie and some of his solid businessmen backers pull the political strings. It was still a surprise to him and a puzzle, just as the death of the former Marshal remained a mystery.

Nobody had seen the gun that got Marshal Everett Goss. The *Double Eagle Saloon* had been crowded, a fight going on, the light dim, bottles smashing. In the midst of noise and violence, there lay Everett Goss in his own blood. The killer had struck and vanished and the lawman's gun was still in his holster. It was a sobering picture for Cameron to carry with him where ever he went through the roistering crowds.

But Pete kept on, fulfilling his many and varied duties, learning the complicated ways of the law and the devious ways of the law-breakers. And with the passing days, his respect for the job grew. Maybe, he thought, in time he would come to prefer it ahead of ranching. Maybe he'd found his true place...

Then came word of increasing pressure on the miners along the lower creek.

THE CHILL of foreboding that had haunted Pete's mind turned to simmering anger. He had dared to hope that the weeks of quiet on the creek meant the end of trouble. But Lew Tyle had been only waiting, watching, like a hungry cat at a gopher hole.

Pete paced the worn floor of his little office and stayed away from the creek. There was still a chance, he hoped, that Arch Frisbie could reach an agreement with Tyle, that the trouble would blow over.

If Eric Manx hadn't been associated with Tyle, there would be no problem. But to side with the miners now meant fighting Manx—and the whole town knew of the silent, undeclared feeling between the two men.

Pete never called at the Huntley cabin on the hillside; he was careful to meet Claire only on the open street, in the busy store, at the noisy stage depot. Claire was promised to Eric Manx. For her sake, Cameron kept his distance. But Claire Huntley was a young and attractive woman in a town where women were scarce as daffodils in December. All eyes followed her in the crowd. And a man would have been totally blind not to read the light in her brown eyes whenever she saw Pete—or the devotion Pete returned in his hungering look. It could never have been a secret.

So Pete stayed away from the creek and the clash with Manx and Tyle he was sure would come. He stuck close to his office—until the morning he looked up to find Arch Frisbie at the door.

"We need you, Marshal," Frisbie stated. "They sent Bart Wipple down to collect, and he gun-whipped Bull McCoy senseless—"

Pete followed Frisbie down the slope, a sick chill twisting his stomach. The water in the creek was low, he discovered, and barely half the miners worked dejectedly at their gravel.

"The boys ain't makin' out so good," Frisbie explained. "And they sure can't pay for water they ain't gittin'!"

Pete pushed on past a row of dry sluice-boxes, cracking in the sun, to find McCoy's crude camp. The big man lay on a blanket by his tattered lean-to shelter, his head a bloody, swelling mass of cuts and abrasions.

Pete's throat tightened. "Where's the man who did this?" he demanded hotly.

A couple of the raiders fell . . .

"You lookin' for me, Marshal?" a smooth voice came from behind Pete.

Cameron whirled to face Tyle's hired gunman, lean, hard-eyed Bart Whipple. Pete caught his breath, his pulse thumping in his ears. This was the first time he'd faced Wipple, the first chance he'd found to meet the man at close range. Wipple was a taller man than he expected, well-built and clean shaven, his close-scraped jaws blue from the raven-black beard stubble. He could, Pete decided, actually be called handsome—the kind the dance-hall girls flocked around—except for his eyes. They were the brittle eyes of a killer.

"What's the story here?" Pete asked flatly.

Wipple shrugged. "Self-defense. He came at me—I had to knock him down."

PETE HESITATED. Judging from McCoy's size and reputation, the story was almost believable, except for the marks on the miner.

"Of course," Wipple went on, "if you don't like that story, Marshal—you can always arrest me and take me in."

Pete set his teeth. "Lew Tyle sent you down here, didn't he?"

Wipple shook his head, showing his white teeth in a hard grin. "Eric Manx sent me. Manx, the man who's goin' to marry Claire Huntley week after next."

Pete stiffened, hot blood pounding dizzily in his head, and for the first time in weeks his healed ribs began to ache. He stared at Bart Wipple. This was a direct challenge, their own way of pitting him directly against Manx, knowing that Cameron wouldn't fight. If Pete made a move against Eric Manx, they'd claim it was a rivalry fight over a woman, and that would turn the whole town against him. Pete swallowed bitterly. Tyle's strategy was plain—he'd waited until the marshal job meant something to Pete, until he valued the opinion of the townspeople, before he'd made his move!

"Go back and tell your boss," Pete ordered hoarsely, "that we'll have no more violence down here!"

Wipple shrugged lightly. "Just as you say, Marshal." He turned and swaggered away, an insolent twist to his shoulders, the ivory-gripped six-

shooter jutting out from his thigh at just the right angle. "Of course," he said over his shoulder, "I'll be back tomorrow to collect from Sim Anders and Hod Brown—"

Pete turned back numbly to face Arch Frisbie's rage-contorted face. Frisbie spat in the gravel and wiped his mouth roughly with the back of his hand. "When we hired you for Marshal, Pete, we thought we'd hired a fighter—a man!"

Pete felt his face stiffen, cold. "Get some of your men over here, Frisbie," he suggested flatly, "and tote McCoy up to Doc Smith's office. The man needs care—"

"Who the devil's goin' to pay the doctor bill?" Frisbie asked.

"I will! Just get a move on before the man dies!"

Arch Frisbie went down along the line of mining claims and recruited a volunteer crew. They walked past Pete without looking at him and rolled the unconscious Bull McCoy on a crude two-plank stretcher and carried him up the grade toward the street.

Cameron worked his way up along the stream until he came to Sim Anders, a meek-faced, worried-eyed little miner standing knee-deep in a puddle of cold water shaking a gold pan.

"Do me a favor, Sim?" he asked. "How much did McCoy owe?"

Sim Anders squinted up his eyes against the sun and named a small figure. "It's a lot of money, if he ain't got it," he added.

Pete took the roll from his own pocket and counted out the sum. "Will you pay Lew Tyle for him, Sim? I'll take care of his doctor bill. And you and Hod Brown still owe Tyle—"

Anders looked at his empty gold pan. "We're both dead broke."

Pete tripled the sum and shoved it into the miner's reluctant hand. "That'll put all three of you in the clear for a while."

Anders shook his head. "We thank yuh, Marshal. But you reckon it's right? We don't figure we owe Manx and Tyle nothin'!"

"Pay 'em anyhow," Pete gritted. "Sometimes givin' in to 'em is the quickest way to beat 'em!"

But it wasn't the answer, he knew. He was only stalling, dodging the showdown, buying another day's time. And how long could he expect to keep ahead of Tyle?

AS THE DAYS went by, Pete Cameron dipped again and again into his store of money to help the miners pay off—until the fat roll Tyle had paid him for his ranch up in the gulch had been whittled thin. He didn't mind the cost; he would have given it all. But he was gaining nothing. Lew Tyle only increased his demands.

Pete met Claire Huntley on the street. "I don't reckon I was cut out to be a lawman," he declared. "I figure to give it up—"

"Pete—no!" Claire cried. "We—the whole town needs you, looks up to you—"

Great, Pete thought. *Just great—until the day soon when they force me to show my hand against Eric Manx!* But how could he explain it to Claire? How could a man point out a triangle if he was a part of it? He'd do better to write out his resignation and leave it on his desk and ride away!

But when he returned to his office, Frisbie was waiting.

"Sim Anders is bad hurt," Arch said bitterly. "If you're at all interested, *Marshal—"*

Pete hesitated, the hot tremor of indecision shaking through him. A man could hold off only so long! He looked at Frisbie, met the eyes of the man who had been his friend. "Let's go!" he said.

They found little Sim Anders lying beside his empty gold pan, his face cut and beaten, nose broken, almost unrecognizable. The doctor and two miners worked over him. Other miners stood back, faces stiff with anger. Over

at one side, Bart Wipple waited insolently, picking his white teeth with a pine sliver.

Cameron took one look at the man on the ground. He spun on the Wipple. "I'm arrestin' you, Wipple! Shuck off your gunbelt!" Blood pounded in Pete's head. If the man would only make his play...

But the gunman shrugged lightly, white teeth grinning. "Just as you say, Marshal—" He reached down carefully and unbuckled his belt and just as carefully let it drop to the ground.

Pete motioned him up the hill. Around him, behind him, all along the line, growls of long-suppressed rage sprang from miners' tight throats. One wrong move and they'd take the prisoner!

Wipple grinned crookedly as he strode ahead of Pete. "Sounds like a lynch-mob, Marshal. It's your solemn duty to protect me!"

Pete set his teeth. Maybe this last move *was* a mistake—maybe he ought to step aside and let the miners handle it! But his job, his respect for the law meant too much. He hurried the man down the street and through his office, shutting doors behind him, and on into the jail and a shadowy, waiting, iron-barred cell.

Pete slammed the cell door and inserted the key. Wipple stooped over in the shadows, facing Pete, his hand to his stomach as though suddenly sick. He straightened abruptly, and blinding orange flame spouted from a short-barreled double derringer.

THE RANGE was close. Burning powder stung Cameron's face, and the bullet slapped his chest with a lightning jolt that took his breath, half-paralyzed him. Sheer instinct of survival made Pete drop his keys and grab his gun; there was another bullet coming.

Pete fired the instant his Colt cleared leather. His shot tore into Wipple, low in the belly. It knocked him back across the cell as the derringer let go the second time. Wipple's bullet burned through the side of Pete's neck just above the collar bone and spun him half around. He gripped the bars to keep himself up.

Wipple slumped down against the back wall, and muscles along his blue jaws twitched helplessly. Finally words came. "You're fast with a gun, Marshal—too fast—for me—"

Pete stared at the man. "That derringer—that's the way you got Everett Goss."

Wipple nodded weakly, his mouth twisting. "Shoulda got you—" His head slumped forward, and he was dead.

Pete clung to the bars. His neck felt as if a burning timber had fallen across it. But the other bullet worried him more. It had hit him hard. Cautiously he felt across his chest. His fingers touched rough corners of his law badge. With an effort he twisted his bullet-burned neck to look down. The points of the badge were curled up, the metal warped and blackened by the smashing jolt of the lead bullet.

Pete drew a deep breath, and a shaky laugh shivered through him. Claire had hinted that this badge would bring him luck!

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CLAIRE HUNTLEY insisted on treating Pete's bullet-burned neck herself. She took him up to her cabin on the hillside as soon as Doc Smith had probed and prodded to be sure that no stray bits of lead remained in the wound.

"You'll have a stiff neck for a while," the doctor had warned. "And plenty touchy. A few raw nerves. Eighth of an inch closer might have settled your troubles for good!"

Claire applied soft poultices and propped up his head with pillows in a big rocking chair, while little Dale stared wide-eyed at the bullet-twisted badge. Under Claire's gentle hands, the soreness eased out quickly and the wound began to heal. But the conflict in him, the tortured indecision that had become a part of his life even to undermining his sense of duty to his job, grew on and on to approach the breaking point.

"Claire," Pete said grimly, when Dale had gone from the room, "law badge or not—I had to kill another man!"

Claire pressed her cool hand on his brow. "Don't say that, Pete! There's no blame on you. Bart Wipple gambled away his life the minute he hid that little derringer with the intention of using it. His actions were deliberate and planned; you only did your duty and shot in self-defense."

Cameron drew a deep breath to steady the pounding in his temples, the renewed throbbing in his neck. "Claire—would you still feel the same, still consider that I was right in my sworn duty, if I had shot—" He choked and swallowed painfully. "Claire—what if that man had been Eric Manx!"

Claire stiffened, her face chalk-white. "You're being very unfair, Pete, to say a thing like that!" Her voice was so faint it scarcely carried to him. She put her hand to her throat. "I—I know you wouldn't—"

"Claire—if I have to—" Pete stared down at his clenched hands. "I love you, Claire," he said softly, hoarsely. "Heaven knows, I don't want to hurt you. If you're goin' to marry Eric Manx next week—"

"Please, Pete! Let's not discuss Eric—"

"But he's in it, Claire—in that crooked squeeze-deal right along with Lew Tyle! Wipple swore Manx had sent him—"

Claire gave a stifled cry and dropped to her knees beside Cameron's chair, staring up at him, her brown eyes wide and moist with pain. "No, Pete—no! Wipple was lying! They're trying to hurt Eric, Pete! If only you knew Eric the way I know him—week after week on the trail, watching over Dennis, lifting him, caring for him when it was beyond my strength, like a stronger brother to all of us. No man could have done more!"

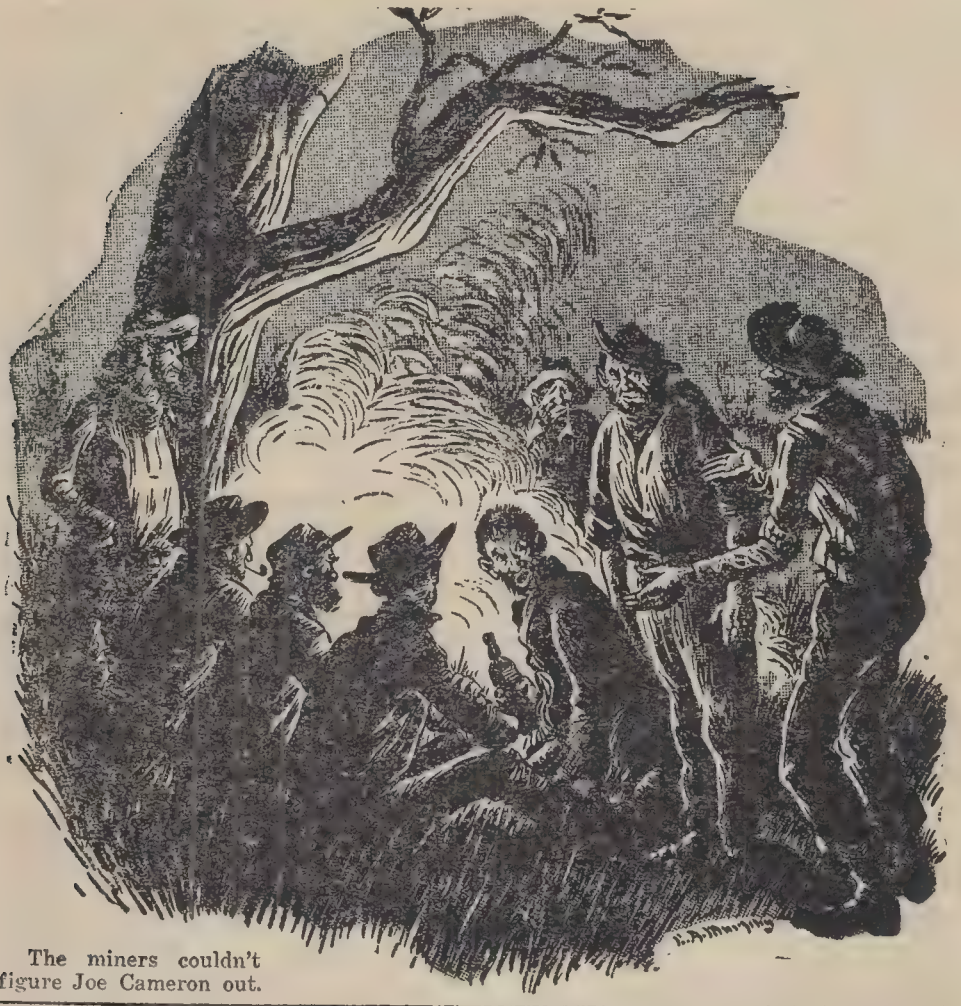
Claire dropped her head against Pete's knee, buried her face in her hands. "Eric made a mistake when he joined Lew Tyle, but he did it for me, Pete. He wanted to be rich and powerful to do more for me. I didn't ask it, Pete—please believe me—I didn't want it. But he went ahead. Now he won't even talk about it. They force him to neglect the store, to spend long hours away from town—" Claire's shoulders shook with wracking sobs.

Pete opened his clenched fist and stroked her hair with his fingers, and physical pain started in his loins and ran up through his chest to center in his bullet-wounded neck. It took away his breath, left him weak and shaking.

"Eric hasn't changed, Pete," Claire vowed softly, earnestly. "You should see him with little Dale, watching over him, talking to him, taking him around in the buggy. His own father couldn't have done better—"

PETE'S FINGERS clenched again, achingly. Too often he'd seen tow-haired little Dale sitting proudly on the buggy seat beside Eric Manx, looking up with wide-eyed gratitude at the boney, round-headed Mercantile owner. Too often he had wished that he himself might be driving that buggy instead of Manx, that he himself might be earning the child's confidence. But he had only set his teeth and hurried away about his law enforcement chores.

Claire got up slowly and stood beside Pete's chair, drying her eyes, trying to control her sobs. Then she stooped and kissed him gently, carefully on the fore-



The miners couldn't figure Joe Cameron out.

head. "Please, Pete—" she whispered. "Give Eric a chance—"

Pete squared his feet on the floor and pushed himself up out of the chair. Forgetting his bandaged neck, he whirled and caught Claire in his arms. Hungrily, urgently, he found her lips with fervent kisses. He kissed her cheeks, her hair, her mouth. "I love you, Claire!" he whispered hoarsely. "I love you!"

Claire stood limp in his arms, her eyes wide with aching despair. "Pete—no! You can't—you can't—"

He let her go so quickly that she reeled against the wall, and he swung across the room to the door. Claire cried out after him, calling his name, warning him of his bullet-hurt.

"Gotta see about Sim Anders," he explained lamely. And he slammed outside and down the steep path to the dusty, crowded street.

He didn't have to check on Anders; Doc Smith had already told him the little miner would recover. But he had a last call to make at his office and he had a horse to saddle.

He'd see to the saddling first, he decided. Years on the range gave a man the instinct to be ready to ride. But before he could duck into the alley to the livery stable, Arch Frisbie hurried into the street, breathless, to stop him.

"Pete!" Frisbie called. And some of

the old respect had come into the look on the miner's square face. "Pete—they done it! Shut the water off—crick's dry as an empty whiskey bottle! The boys are goin' to dynamite the dam—"

Cameron's blood froze; this was the showdown. This was the finish. He cleared his throat. "Out of my jurisdiction," he said stiffly. "Outside of the town limits—"

Frisbie's eyes hardened. "You mean you ain't with us!"

"That's about it, Arch." Pete set his teeth as the pain beat in his neck. "When you men go after that dam, you're on your own!"

As long as he lived, Pete swore, he'd never forget the condemnation in Arch Frisbie's eyes as the man turned away. But there was no choice. Pete stumbled on toward the stable. Before the dynamite blew, he had to be many miles from this town. He had to cross Sugar Pine out of his mind and out of his heart forever.

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GETTING away from Sugar Pine was not as easy as Pete Cameron had counted on. The stableman had to hear the story about Bart Wipple. Others, who had seen Wipple, came in with more questions. Butcher Hans Schmidt, who had clashed with Wipple over cattle bought from Lew Tyle—from the ranch that had been Pete's—had to buy Pete a drink in celebration.

Altogether, nearly an hour passed before Pete led his horse up to the hitchrack beside the jail and went into his cramped little office. Hurriedly then he checked through the desk. Everything there belonged to the law job. There was nothing he had to take with him. He could be on his way.

He started for the door and remembered that he had to leave some sort of word, a written resignation to clear the job for some better man to follow. Reluctantly, he went back to the desk and took out paper and stubborn, scratchy quill pen. Through the open window he could hear conversation from the street, already talk about the army of miners storming up the creek to reach the dam. Pete heard his name mentioned in excited tones. The time was dwindling out—he had to move!

He dipped the pen in the watery ink. But before he could touch it to paper, the door burst open and a breathless, wild-eyed young puncher came stumbling in.

"Marshal—" the boy gasped. "Arch Frisbie sent me! Said to tell you—Eric Manx has drove up to the dam—" He gulped a fresh breath of air to go on. "Took the little kid—little Dale Huntley—up there with him. On the end of the dam—"

Cameron came out of his chair, spilling it over behind him, blood pounding red across his eyes. In two jumps he caught the puncher by the shoulders of his denim jacket. "Give it to me straight!" Pete yelled. "Is Dale Huntley up on that dam? Talk, man—"

The puncher nodded, gulping. "I saw him myself, a-settin' there in the buggy—"

Pete tossed the man roughly aside and dove through the door, a bitter, chilling numbness running down through him, through every vein. Eric Manx had deliberately taken the boy into danger after his promise to Claire. Worse, he could be using the child to turn Frisbie's men back, to stop the dynamiting.

Pete smashed through the crowd that had gathered and jumped into the saddle and spurred into the street. Thank Heaven, he thought, he'd had the horse ready to travel!

He pounded past the Mercantile, and

Claire called to him from the sidewalk, but he didn't look around. Claire had asked him to give Eric a chance—but the man had played out his cards. From here on there was no turning back!

On the canyon road, Pete met dark-faced miners, waving, yelling, pointing angrily. He swept past them and on up the winding, steep-pitched grade. On a high turn he burst into sight of the dam, and his breath caught in his throat.

This was the first time he'd seen the structure since it had been finished. It was higher than he had imagined, a solid, neat wall of rock and earth tightly filling the gap between two sheer walls of the canyon. A gate of planks and timbers built into one side of the dam was closed tight and no water coming through.

The horse carried Pete up over a crest in the trail, and his pulse suddenly hammered in his ears. There, ahead of him, at the end of the dam sat the open buggy. Even at the distance, he could make out Dale Huntley's light-blond hair. Eric Manx *had* brought the boy all the way up the canyon!

PETE TOUCHED spurs to the horse. But two men were moving into the road ahead to stop him. Both carried ready carbines. Pete drew his gun and threw a hasty shot at the feet of the near gunman, and both turned to duck for cover. They were the two young gun-toters, Pete recognized, who had shoved poor drunken Fuzzy Potter into the saloon. So Lew Tyle *had* been back of that deal.

The two dodged into shelter of the pines that grew above the road, and Pete reined up, anger boiling in him. To ride on now, he'd be heading straight into a bushwhack trap. He swung back to put solid hill between him and the two gunman. There had to be another way to reach the dam!

But the trio of bullets lifted dust in the road around him, and the faint sound of gunshots drifted across the canyon. He whirled to scan the opposite hill. A crude board shack had been built at the other end of the damn, he saw, an office or headquarters for the outfit. As he looked, four men with carbines fanned out from the building, and more bullets snicked into the rocks close around him.

Cursing, Pete reined back down the trail, crowding his horse. The longer he stayed up here the more chance there was for a stray bullet to reach Dale, or even to stampede the buggy team. His stomach twisted at the possibility.

At the bottom of the steep pitch of road, Arch Frisbie waved him down. "In here, Pete!" the miner yelled, "This way—"

Pete found the miners, with their carbines and their dynamite, crowded along the dry stream bank under the bulging shoulder of a granite wall. From here he could see only a part of the dam.

"They can't reach us here below the dam," Frisbie explained, "but we're pinned down. We can't move—"

"We could go ahead and dynamite the dam in spite of 'em," Hod Brown declared, "if it wasn't for the kid up there—"

"Dynamite it anyhow!" somebody yelled from back in the crowd. But

when Cameron whirled to face the man, he had lost courage and ducked away out of sight.

"Can't a man climb that canyon wall on the south, come up below their shack?" Pete asked quickly. "From over on the road it looked like a break in the granite—"

"It'd be suicide!" Frisbie declared. "If a man *could* do it!"

Pete pulled the carbine from his saddle scabbard. "I'm goin' up that wall. If anything happens to Dale—"

"We'll cover you—" a miner offered, and four or five men stepped forward, gripping their carbines.

"No!" Pete shouted. "Not a shot from down here—the slugs glancin' off that granite would slice right over the dam!" Pete eyed the crowd in desperate urgency. "I'm obliged to you men, but you trigger so much as one shot and I'll turn my own gun on you, so help me!"

The men backed up, stumbling against each other at the stress in Pete's voice. Arch Frisbie laid a hand on Cameron's arm. "I'll go along up that wall with you, Pete!"

Pete shook his head. "Afraid there's only room for one in the crevice I spotted—" He glanced around the waiting group of miners. "You want to help, Arch—scatter your men back down along the road. Keep out of range so you don't get hit, but keep 'em worried watchin' you. And for the sake of that lad up in the buggy, don't shoot!"

PETE DUCKED low and ran along the creek bed until the dam loomed huge and towering above him. At last, almost to the loose rubble at the base of the dam itself, he found the break in the south wall. He caught an aching breath—it was a ragged split in the granite sixty feet high, curving, zigzagging, indefinite. Maybe it wouldn't even lead out at the top. But he had to try.

He plunged into the crevice and started up. For a distance it slanted, and he climbed it like a ladder. Then it tilted back, and he had to brace himself with the carbine for a staff. And every pull on his shoulder muscles stirred fiery torture in the bullet-crease along his neck.

About halfway up to where he judged the shack might be, the crevice began to run shallow, to pinch in on him. And the wall of the canyon no longer bulged to shield him from guns above. He pulled himself into an open saddle in the rock, and a rifle bullet spattered the cliff in front of him, stinging his face with lead.

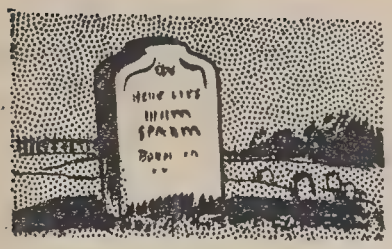
Pete jerked his head around. There on a ledge between him and the dam clung a thin, yellow-haired gunman—the same man, Pete was sure, that he'd winged for a rustler. This completed the story—Lew Tyle had been behind Cameron's trouble from the start.

Pete ducked another bullet from the man's gun. Then he jerked up his carbine and caught the man dead center, watched him stiffen and pitch down over the cliff into the shadowy canyon below. His heart in his throat, Pete checked to be sure the buggy still stood at the other end of the dam.

But more bullets reached for him now. He had to abandon the crevice and crawl along a slanting ledge. Carefully, cautiously, he returned the fire. And two more gunmen felt his searing lead.

He had almost reached the level of the shack, he realized. He could make out rough voices in heated argument just above him. Some of Tyle's men were quitting, backing out. Pete's hopes picked up as their curses faded away on an up-canyon trail.

Then he caught the desperate voice of Eric Manx—Manx was calling to Dale, calling him across the dam. Pete twisted on his slanting ledge and saw the boy climb down out of the buggy and start confidently across the narrow dam toward Manx—toward the shack just above the spot where Pete clung to the granite cliff.



Pete's insides knotted up like wet rope. His throat worked spasmodically. Max was deliberately bringing the boy closer, deliberately trying to use him for an innocent human shield!

Pete braced himself and yelled, his body shaking with the effort to make his voice carry. "Dale! Dale—go back! Dale—go back to the buggy! Go back—go back—go back—"

The boy hesitated, turning his pale-blond head from side to side, looking, stumbling. Pete could imagine the puzzlement in his big brown eyes.

"Turn around and go back, Dale!" Pete pleaded. "Back—"

But Eric Manx kept on calling to the boy, shouting, coaxing. Little Dale Huntley came on as far as the middle of the dam. Then the sheer edge of panic plain in Eric's voice began to unnerve him, and he burst into tears. Stumbling, he sat down in the middle of the dam and rubbed his fists in his eyes.

PETE PUSHED himself up, his legs shaking with tension under him. He had to fight his way on up to the shack, fast—before Manx could get to Dale, or frighten the boy into greater danger.

At shoulder height another break opened up in the granite, and Cameron jumped for it. Singing lead from a lone six-gun scored the rock and ripped down along his arm and shoulder, drawing blood. Pete set his teeth and clambered ahead. He couldn't risk a shot now, with Dale out there in the open.

More bullets slapped and whined against age-worn granite, but the crack in the cliff-side widened out above him to the open blue sky. Another eight feet and he'd reach the shack level.

There were no hand-holds, no breaks or cracks for a boot to grip, only smooth granite surfaces widening apart. In a desperate gamble, Pete wedged the carbine between the walls and climbed on it. It held. With every fiber of muscle, he jumped and threw himself up over the ledge into the open.

A sixgun barked, and the bullet burned his ribs, barely grazing skin. Then Pete faced Lew Tyle across thirty feet of wide, sloping granite at the end of the crude board building.

It was a different Tyle than Pete had ever seen. He was no longer the feared and powerful boss who sent other men to face death and do his killing; this time he was caught alone. This time he faced his own risks. His glittering, squinted eyes were wide and haunted, his thick jaws set in a wolfish grin of naked fear. He staggered back, frantically snapping the hammer on empty shells in his ivory-handled Colt.

Pete reached for his own gun, then changed his mind. He wouldn't shoot the man in his helpless condition. He'd use bare hands, swift, avenging fists. He bounded forward.

But Tyle dropped his ivory-handled Colt. His right hand clawed under his coat and flashed out a hideaway gun and he thumbed back the hammer.

Pete drew his '41 without breaking stride and shot the man twice just above the belt. Lew Tyle never pulled trigger; he reeled back, doubling over. He slipped and rolled down the sloping ledge and dropped away into space.

Without slacking his pace, Pete Cameron smashed on through the back door of the shack, his gun ready. Eric Manx waited somewhere just ahead. Pete's throat tightened. In spite of all his effort, all the sacrifice, the turning aside from his sworn duty, the running away, for Claire Huntley's sake, in

spite of every risk and every injury he'd taken to avoid a clash with Manx, now he'd have to turn his gun on the man. His heart hammered swelling pain in his chest, and Claire's distraught face swam before his eyes. But there was no turning back. He dragged a rough hand across his brow and slammed on into the building.

THE PLACE was empty, a shambles, chairs overturned, empty carbine shells and spilled whiskey bottles on the plank floor. Pete read the sign in a sweeping glance and he jumped the litter and pounded on through the open front door to the end of the dam.

A gun barked and a bullet splintered the door frame as Pete hit the open. Manx was running, stumbling backward across the dam. Pete swung his Colt on the man automatically, but his finger froze on the trigger. Dale sat just beyond, almost in line.

Manx fired again, and Pete reeled from the shock of a heavy slug through the flesh of his right thigh. Pete staggered to catch his balance and started for the man, running limping, hobbling.

But Manx had reached the spot where Dale Huntly sat in the rough gravel of the dam. Waving his gun, he grabbed for the boy to pull him up for a shield.

Pete braced his feet and raised his Colt and took hasty, desperate aim. A prayer on his lips, he pulled the trigger.

Eric Manx never quite reached his grip on the boy's jacket; Pete's bullet took him perfectly between the eyes. Manx stiffened backward, tottered a moment, and plunged down over the steep, boulder-studded lower slope of the dam.

Pete tried three times to swallow. It was all over. And Dale Huntley still sat crying on the solid pathway of the dam. The boy was confused, scared, miserable, but wholly safe. Thank Heaven, Pete thought gratefully, that Dale's eyes had been too flooded with tears, too well blocked by his own chubby fists, for him to witness the humiliated, inglorious death of the man who had taken him riding once too often in the open buggy!

Pete started for the boy, slowly, stumbling. But voices were already calling from the road beyond the dam, miners moving up to make sure the way was clear. And a rig from the livery stable rattled to a stop beside the buggy that Manx had left.

With all Pete's diligent effort to cover ground, Claire Huntley reached Dale at the same time Pete did. She threw her arms around both of them, hugging Dale, quieting his fears, gripping Pete and kissing him with a fevor of love and understanding that drove out all his doubts, all his dreaded worries.

Ten minutes later, Pete Cameron sat beside Dale on the dam, while Claire, her eyes shining with happiness, finished binding up the last bullet-wound.

Arch Frisbie stood a moment nearby, then cleared his throat. "The boys are wonderin," he remarked, "how soon you three can get off the dam. They're rarin' to dynamite this thing plumb out of the canyon! If I can give you a hand, Pete—"

Pete shook his head, grinning, and looked around at the big blue reservoir of water already backed up behind the fill.

"What's your hurry about blowin' it up? You're all stockholders in this enterprise. Now that you can control it yourselves, why not use all this engineering to keep your water supply steady—"

Frisbie gasped as the idea hit him. "Why—sure thing, Pete! Blamed if you ain't the only level head among us! *You're sure right!*"

"But don't get so busy," Pete warned, "that you can't take time for a holiday. Because just as soon as I can stand on my feet, we're gettin' married, and you're all invited to the wedding!"

★

The Days of Forty-Nine

by Harold Gluck

THIS is a poem that was written by an unknown miner; it was popular about a century ago. It was heard in California, and Colonel George Hunter mentioned that he enjoyed it because he was acquainted with some of those whose names are mentioned in its lines.

You are gazing now at Old Tom Moore—a relic of bygone days;
A bummer now they call me sure, but I'm not fond of praise:
My heart is light, I make it so, yet oft I do repine,
For the days of old, the days of gold, the days of 'Forty-nine.

I then had friends that loved me well—a jovial and hearty crew;
There were some hard cases, I must confess, yet they were brave and true;
They stood the pinch; they'd never flinch; they'd never fret nor whine;
Like good old bricks, they stood the kicks in the days of 'Forty-nine.

There was New York Jake, the 'Butcher Boy,' so fond of getting tight;
And whenever Jake got on a spree, he was spoiling for a fight.
One night Jake ran against a knife in the hands of old Bob Cline,
And over Jake we held a wake in the days of 'Forty-nine.

There was Monte Pete—I remember well the luck he always had;
He'd deal for you, both night and day, as long as you had a red.
One day a bullet laid Pete out; 'twas his last lay-out, in fine;
For it caught Pete, sure, dead in the door, in the days of 'Forty-nine.

There was Buffalo Bill, who could outroar a Buffalo bull, you bet;
He'd roar all day, and he'd roar all night, and I guess he's roaring yet,
One night Bill fell in a prospect hole; 'twas a roaring bad design,
For in that hole Bill roared up his soul, in the days of 'Forty-nine.

There was Poker Bob; I knew him well—so fond of a little game,
And if he lost, or if he won, to Bob 'twas all the same;
He'd rush the buck and ante a slug, and go a hat-full blind,
But in a game with death Bob lost his breath, in the days of 'Forty-nine.

There was old lame Jess, a hard old case; he never would repent,
He never was known to miss a meal, nor never to pay a cent,
But poor old Jess, like all the rest, to death he did resign,
And in his bloom went up the flume in the days of 'Forty-nine.

Of all the friends that I had then, there is none now left to toast,
They have left me here to wander alone like some poor wandering ghost.
And as I wander from place to place, they call me a wandering sign,
Saying, 'There's old Moore, a bummer sure, of the days of 'Forty-nine.'

Old John Tinsley wanted a real longhorn man for a son-in-law, and somehow Linc Hull found himself selected as official tester. Anyone Linc could beat up, obviously wasn't good enough for Polly!

LONGHORN MAN

by Gene Austin

LINCOLN HULL was exactly six feet tall and claimed to weigh exactly two hundred pounds. Actually, he was only one ninety-seven pounds without his six shooter, which he wasn't wearing now because there was an ordinance against it in Cool Spring. Linc had been in town since morning, had fortified himself with a couple of hooters of Old Crow, and moved to one of the shaded places on the boardwalk. He leaned against Calderone's harness shop, from where a man could survey the entire town, and more or less watch the world go by.

Linc had put in about an hour there when a big grullo horse appeared at the north end of town carrying a large rider in a green shirt and black Stetson, and with a pair of bullhide chaps dangling from his saddle horn as if he had just come out of brush country. The hitch-rack in front of Calderone's was tied full, but the rider rode up there, dismounted, and stepped up on the boardwalk holding the reins of the grullo and giving Linc Hull a cool, superior look.

"My name's R. N. Slaughter, youngster," he said, as if that explained tremendously. "Hold the reins of this here pony while I get a bite an' a drink. Don't let go, because I don't ride nothin' that ain't half mustang an' he might run away."

Linc's reaction was immediate. He had looked a little bit sleepy, but he became awake suddenly and his face went pale in a rush, like a plain when the sun has topped the mountains. He put his right forefinger in his ear and turned the finger a couple of times and then pointed the ear toward Slaughter. "Would you mind goin' over that again, son?"

Slaughter stared back at him for a minute silently and then shrugged and grinned secretively. He stepped off the boardwalk and led the grullo on down the road, where another cowhand was loafing by MacIntyre's store. There was a brief exchange and Slaughter walked off leaving the cowhand holding the reins of the grullo in a rather dazed manner.

Linc put that man down as con-

This time, Lime had a personal grudge to work out . . .

temptible and proceeded to roll a cigaret. He continued to watch the north end of the road leading into town. He could see far out over the prairie, and presently a black spot appeared among the stretch of brown grass and parched brush and by the time he was taking the last drag on his cigarette it had materialized into a buggy. The buggy came on into town and pulled into the alley behind the hotel. Its passengers shortly appeared on the boardwalk—a girl and a man. The girl was nicely shaped and she had a pretty face. She was all dressed up in blue, including a bonnet with white lace trim from which her brown curls were cleverly made to peep. The man was sort of bandy legged but above the waist he was powerfully built and Linc Hull noticed that he had very long arms and that his hands were large sized.

IT HAD TAKEN so long for the buggy to get in that he had lost some of the edge that he had built up.

But he remembered that all this was necessary and preordained, so he stomped out his butt and headed across the road toward the couple.

The man eyed him suspiciously as he approached; the girl's mouth became tight and her eyes flamed at him. Linc looked at her apologetically and faced the man. He inspected the man carefully at close range. Then he got a good toehold in the sand with his left foot.

"I know you," he said. "You're from Abeline, Kansas, an' you steal horses. You better not hang around Cool Spring."

The man's eyes widened. He was speechless for a moment and then he roared, "You're a liar! I work for the K-Y on the Nueces! I'm a bronc peeler, an'—"

"Don't call me a liar," Linc warned; "you're the liar."

Linc figured that would be enough for the Nueces bronc peeler, and so he was ready when one of the big hands got made into a fist and came around aimed at his head. He blocked it and the girl screamed and ran for the hotel porch. Linc Hull bounced a fist off the bronc peeler's bony head. They got into a clinch and fought all the way across the road, knocked over a watering trough and rammed into the wall of a clothing shop. A man came running out and started swearing at them.

Linc got loose and stunned the Nueces man with a couple of hard clouts, but the bronc peeler retaliated by kicking him in the stomach. They clinched again and swayed out into the road, fell and rolled in the dust. Linc got loose and stood up and waited for the bronc peeler to get his feet but not his balance. He clubbed him on the chin and the man went out cold. Linc went over and righted the watering trough and dragged the bronc peeler over to it and sat him comfortably against it. By this time the girl had come down off the hotel porch and ran up to Linc, her face flushed with fury.

"Damn you!" she said. "Oh, I wish he'd beaten you up!"

Linc Hull was uncomfortable, as he had been the last time he had been forced to fight. "Polly, your old man..."

POLLY MADE some sort of a screeching, furious sound in her throat which cut him off short. And with deepening discomfort, Linc noticed that several onlookers had gathered. One of them was R. N. Slaughter, who watched with a faint smile and folded arms.

"Ma'am," said Slaughter, speaking up suddenly and removing his black Stetson, "I reckon I can take care of that for you."

Polly glanced at him quickly but didn't answer, turning instantly back to Linc with evidence of another attack. Slaughter added, glancing at Linc, "I can whip this hombre if you want me to, miss."

The hair rose on the back of Linc's neck. "The hell you can," he growled, turning toward Slaughter, who had put his hat back on. Polly stepped instantly between them, giving Linc a look of contempt and Slaughter a half interested going over. "I'm afraid I don't know you," Polly said crisply to Slaughter. "I'm sure you can whip him, but I think I've seen enough battling for today. Good afternoon."

Linc Hall watched hotly as she went to the fallen Nueces man, helped him to his feet, and led him toward the hotel. Slaughter, smiling mysteriously, went and lent a hand, and under Linc's fierce gaze the several other onlookers quickly dispersed. "Hell," said Linc, heading disgustedly back up toward Caledrone's. He had a buckskin gelding tied there which he forked heavily and thumped its round stomach with his heels, starting it trotting north. The sun beat warmly on his back, setting him to thinking glumly.

The brash newcomer, R. N. Slaughter, appeared to be taking a liking to

Polly and a dislike to himself. It would, Linc thought, probably mean another fight if things continued the way they had been going. He wasn't adverse to it, for outside of smoking and an occasional drunk there was nothing to do but work, and a thumping fist fight suited his nature exactly. He had beat up three consecutive suitors of Polly's; but suppose, he thought with awful bleakness, he lost! Then John Tinsley, Polly's father, would with savage glee forever let his longlegged, wild, thin sided, bony hipped and huge horned cattle ford the stream separating his stripped acres from the green little Posie, and mess Linc's purebred Hereford line up worse than they had already.

JOHN TINSLEY owned the biggest, wildest, gauntest longhorn cattle Linc Hull had ever seen. He had not had a roundup for four years; and on that last one, when he'd sold a beef cut to a Montana drover who attempted to drive them north, they stampeded and disappeared. Some were eventually seen again roaming through the brush and canyons of John Tinsley's wasteland.

Tinsley apologized to the drover and said he reckoned there weren't any men around any more good enough to handle those cattle, which were the last of the real old tough longhorns in the territory. Men now, said John Tinsley, were so soft it was all they could do to drive the herefords, which were like baloons. Tinsley, who was pretty old now, said he could drive his longhorns if he had a mind to, but he reckoned he'd let them run wild for the sake of posterity.

And he'd dress up in a black suit, go in town, and get drunk; then he'd go sit on the hotel porch and recall at great length to anyone who would listen harrowing tales of past trail drives he had bossed. John Tinsley was widely known as the best trail driver around and one of the best the West had ever produced. He gloried in the acclaim.

Linc had come onto his own range now, the Posie, so named because there were so many beautiful blooms forever coloring his little spread. He rode alongside the stream which separated his land from Tinsley's. Most of it had been forced to fence off at backbreaking labor and more expense than he could afford. But even though it was as often as not dry as a bone, he could not get along without the water it afforded and was forced to leave sections unfenced so his cattle could get to it.

While he was thinking about it he heard a shot, and then another shot; he booted the buckskin into a running walk. Up a hill and down a slope and he saw Two Bit Watkins, his hand, riding a bay around in circles amongst a brush outcrop and waving a Winchester rifle in the air. At least, Linc Hull thought bitterly, he had once considered Two Bit only a hand.

Linc reined up and stared wildly at Two Bit. "What the hell's goin' on?"

Watkins got his bay gentled. "I'll tell you what's goin on," he hollered. "I rode down here an' found one of Tinsley's danged longhorn bulls bellerin' an stompin around in our range jest lookin for—"

LINC JUMPED off his horse. "You didn't shoot it, Two Bit!"

"I missed," Watkins growled. He had a sort of yellowish complexion and a shaggy mustache which Linc would have loved to yank out by the roots. Watkins had played a dirty trick on him. When Linc had been building fence, and buying cottonseed cake and whatnot—and was almost as tight for money as he was now—he'd always managed to scrape up Two Bit's wages some way. Then Watkins generously told him to let it go till he hit better times.

"Keep it on the books," Two Bit said. "I won't press for it till you can pay."

Linc Hull had been reluctant. He didn't like Watkins' constant shifty expression, but Two Bit insisted. And there were many other places for the money so he finally conceded and damn near two years had passed. Linc owed Watkins a parcel of money, and now Two Bit was acting as if like he owned the ranch.

Watkins wheeled his bay toward the brush again and all of a sudden there was a stirring in it and a big old brindle bull stuck his head out and peered at them. He had hide that was knocked off in places and one of his big sweeping horns was busted at the tip. His little red eyes were meaner than anything in the world, and he snorted and pawed the ground.

"Hell," Linc said, staring back in fascination. He hated Tinsley's damned longhorns but somehow he could not look at one of them without feeling awe. It was like looking at an era that had been romantic and wonderful and that touched the heart—and he was seeing it die irrevocably. Linc could picture huge herds of longhorns going up the trail, and making fifteen and twenty miles a day on their big long legs; he could see fearless, iron-hearted men like John Tinsley driving them, and coming back with their levis full of money.

Then he saw something that was real, not imagining; it was Two Bit Watkins raising his Winchester and aiming it at the bull's head. He reached up and grabbed the gun by the barrel and yanked it out of Watkins' hard grip.

"Who the hell do you think you are?" he bawled, wanting to wrap the rifle around Two Bit's neck. "That bull ain't yours to shoot."

Watkins screamed, "No?" He jumped down off his bay and rammed his yellow face almost into Linc's. "You danged fool, Hull! You raisin' herefords or ain't you? You goin' to let these brush cattle keep on foulin' up our strain—"

"*Our* strain!'

"Yes, *our* strain!" Watkins snarled. "You got any idea how much you owe me, Hull? I claim a share of this ranch—either that or cash on the barrelhead!"

"You louse," Linc said softly. "I wouldn't own you for a partner; I wish I had your time."

"You don't," Two Bit said. "An' either give me my share now, or let it keep pilin' up till I can tell *you* what to do. Or pay me!"

LINC HULL fought his anger down, just enough to where he was sure he wouldn't kill Watkins; then he carefully swung and smashed Two Bit directly below the mustache. Watkins flopped down like a leg-roped calf. Linc got a little more control over his fury and inspected the Winchester—to make sure it was Two Bits and not Linc's own—then he threw it into the stream.

Watkins was still not stirring, so Linc mounted his buckskin, made a loop, and took a throw at the longhorn's head. The bull popped his head back into the brush, fouling Linc's reata. Hull coiled it again and tried another tack, riding into the brush. The longhorn ran out immediately and Linc tried to haze it toward the bank of the stream; but for several wild seconds it persisted in snorting and charging around on the edge of the brush. Finally it gave Hull a last mean look, as if it had had enough fun, and calmly waded the stream and disappeared in the rocks on the other side.

By this time Two Bit Watkins was sitting up, holding his mouth and swearing with vicious abandon. Linc rode over and stared down at him with silent hate.

"You'll regret that," Watkins growled, evidently referring to the punch in the mouth. "You jest go on bein' Tinsley's fool, mister. He got no

more intention of sellin' an' movin' out of here, if Polly don't find a husband, than he does of goin' to the moon. He's enjoyin' these fights you get in; he thinks you're loco."

"You want another one in the teeth?" Linc asked. "Get on your horse an' get out of my sight 'fore I kill you."

Watkins got up and staggered to his horse and mounted and rode away without looking back again. Linc Hull sat mournfully staring out over the plain. As much as he despised Two Bit, there was considerable logic in what the man said. The wild longhorns were poison to his pure hereford strain. John Tinsley did nothing about them, claiming he'd never sell to someone who might try to round them up and clear them out—unless Polly couldn't find a good man around Cool Spring. If she couldn't, he said, he reckoned he would have to sell and take her where there *were* some good men.

But it was a fact that although Linc Hull had beat up three suitors already —which Tinsley seemed to get a big kick out of,—the old man had not made any motions of going elsewhere to hunt a son-in-law. Linc sat there and thought about it and finally separated it into a clear and distinct situation. He hadn't done anything except show he was a better fist-fighter than three men who'd gone around with Polly; and he had made Polly hate him thoroughly. Hull felt pretty badly about that, for he had noticed particularly in town today how pretty Polly was and how it would have been nice to have her think kindly of him. But he had not budged Tinsley or helped the infiltrating of the longhorns.

And now, to top it, he had Watkins to deal with. He would almost sooner get rid of the Posie than have Two Bit owning any part of it. But Linc Hull had no money, and no prospect of getting as much as it would take, even by fall when he could sell a few of his small hereford herd.

He decided it was time to go have another palaver with John Tinsley, and after he and the buckskin had a couple of long draughts of the cool stream water, he mounted again and headed west for Tinsley's ranch house...

IT WAS A long ride to Tinsley's headquarters, and Linc Hull had time to do a lot more thinking—most of it about John Tinsley himself. He was going to have to raise particular hell with Tinsley, he reckoned, and he didn't like that job much. Tinsley was very highly respected by everyone, on account of his trail driving exploits, always looked up to; and Linc wondered if maybe he wouldn't get struck by lightning or something for his impertinence. Fighting Polly's suitors was one thing, but calling down John Tinsley was another.

He found the ranch buildings finally in a small valley and as he neared them he was astonished. The wagon shed roof was caved in and another shed had fallen down completely. The house was in terrible shape, and on the porch sat Tinsley, in his black suit, smoking a huge cigar. Then Linc noticed the unsaddled big grullo grazing not far away. It was R. N. Slaughter's horse. But he did not see Slaughter or Polly anywhere.

John Tinsley was gaunt and long-legged, like his cattle; he had a white beard and a fierce look about him. He looked very old sitting on the top porch step, watching Linc come into his yard and dismount.

"Howdy," Tinsley said, as Linc came up. He took a puff on his cigar. "Heard about the Nueces man. He wouldn't of did for Polly. What I like is what I call longhorn men—tough as a root and sure and certain about what they do and can do. Now—"

"Mr. Tinsley," Linc said, "you got to do somethin' about them longhorn bulls of yours. The steers I don't mind so much, but there's more and more bulls since you ain't had any roundups.

Two Bit Watkins would of shot one today if I hadn't stopped him."

Tinsley puffed jerkily on his cigar. "I don't like that Two Bit," he said.

"I don't like him either," Hull growled, "but it looks like I'm stuck to give him a share of the Posie, dang him. I ain't got the money to pay him off and kick him out."

"If I had it, I'd lend it to you," Tinsley said.

Linc Hull sat down on the step beside him. He looked around a couple of times for a glimpse of Slaughter or Polly, but still could not see them. He said, "I can see that you need money. I never knew your place was run down like this. So look here: everybody knows what a good longhorn man you are. Why don't you have a roundup and drive these critters up north and sell them? You could make a lot of money."

JOHN TINSLEY looked out over the plain. "Them's the last longhorns around here," he said. "I sort of feel like keepin' them so my grandchildren can have a look, for by that time everybody'll be raisin' butterballs like you. They'll look at them longhorns an' say, "There's what grandpappy drove up the trail—them big wild mustang cattle—he was a longhorn man. . . !"

Linc kept trying to catch Tinsley's eye, but the man would not look at him. Hull stared at him, hearing his words; and he looked around at the rundown ranch buildings and the stripped range and then back at Tinsley, who still would not catch his eye. Somehow, he knew that Tinsley was lying.

He said slowly, "I reckon I see it now. You know what happened with the Montana drover, an' you ain't sure of yourself any more."

John Tinsley did not get mad, but he kept looking out over the plain. "If it wasn't true, I'd kill you for sayin' it," he said softly. "But its true, an' you're the only one who knows it."

He did not say anything more for a long time, and the cigar quit smoking in his hand. "But I like to go in town and get drunk an sit on the hotel porch and tell my tales. *They're* all true, an' I want to die with them bein' true. I don't want anyone to know that I ain't the man I used to be—that I'm afraid they'd whip me." He finally looked at Linc with his very pale blue eyes. "You savvy?"

"Savvy," Linc said. He would not tell anyone. It meant a lot to John Tinsley, and it meant as much to Linc Hull and Cool Spring to have him sitting on the hotel porch telling his true tales and knowing that a longhorn had never whipped him. Linc began to roll a cigaret with elaborate care, and they were silent for a long time.

"I don't know what to do," Hull said finally. "I don't want Watkins killin' your bulls; I don't want Two Bit at all. But I can't raise purebred herefords with your longhorns miyin'. But you'll never sell an' go away, will you? There wasn't any use in me beatin' up those men, like the Nueces man."

"No, I ain't goin' away till I die." Tinsley said, relighting his cigar. "There was *some* use in it, though. I figured somebody might come along an' take up with Polly that could do it—round them up an' trail them like it ought to be. All but a couple head, for my grandchildren. You showed me that none of them was a longhorn man."

OUT ON the plain, the big grullo came into view and Linc said, "That horse belongs to R. N. Slaughter. I don't see him here."

"That's because he ain't here," Tinsley said. "Him an' Polly came out an' then they went back in the buggy. I might go in myself." Tinsley stirred a little, and rolled the cigar in his mouth. "Now, that Slaughter's from the Big Bend country. He walks an' talks somethin' like a longhorn man; he told me he can whip anything on two or four feet. If he marries Polly, an' can trail them longhorns, I'll give him a nice cut for a weddin' present. I reckon you won't be fightin' *him*, will you?"

"No, Linc Hull said. "I like to fight, an' they all hit me first, but I don't see any sense pickin' a fight with Slaughter now. Polly hates me enough as it is." Linc Hull stood up, and put on his Stetson, and squashed his cigaret. "So long, John."

"So long," Tinsley said.

Linc caught his buckskin and mounted and doffed his Stetson to Tinsley and headed back for the Posie...

WHEN HE got to the ranch cabin, Hull found Watkins stretched on his bunk drinking whisky. Two Bit was pretty drunk, but did not talk to him or offer him a drink. He laid there with a mean look on his face, staring at the ceiling and singing and swearing between pulls on his bottle.

Linc had intended to eat something, but the sight and sound of Watkins spoiled what little appetite he'd had. He wandered out by the corral, shutting the door so that Two Bit's ravings weren't so distinct. He sat down against a corral post and stabbed the ground with his pocket knife over and over again. It looked as if he'd have to give Watkins a share—either a small one now, or a bigger one as the debt piled up. And he had not settled anything with John Tinsley, except that it wasn't any use to beat up Polly's suitors.

He had an idea that Polly would probably marry R. N. Slaughter, but Linc Hull was not sure that Slaughter was a real longhorn man. Slaughter was mighty windy, and Linc hated to see Polly marry a man like that. He even got to wishing that it was a girl like Polly in the ranch cabin instead of that confounded Watkins; then Linc could go in and have something to eat—and, if it had been Polly, he would have liked to touch the brown hair he'd seen peeping out of her bonnet. He had never thought much about something like that before.

The knife blade hit a rock and broke; Linc Hull stood up in a sudden fury at the whole situation and threw the knife as far as he could. He wanted something to drink, not eat. And he did not want any of Two Bit's bottle, even if Watkins offered it.

There was a sorrel in the corral; Linc saddled it and headed for Cool Spring. By the time he got there it would be evening and he'd start at *Dacy's* and hit all the saloons. He intended to get roaring drunk and drown the lead ball of gloom in his gut. He didn't particularly care if he ever sobered up...

WHEN HE hit Cool Spring it was not quite dark, and Linc Hull tied up immediately at *Dacy's*. He could not help seeing, over on the hotel porch, the big figure of R. N. Slaughter and beside him—sitting with her hands folded in her lap—the small figure of Polly. She had her bonnet off, so that her brown hair blew lightly in the breeze.

He parted the batwing doors of *Dacy's* and marched into the warm, noisy place, glaring now with the light of kerosene lamps with newly cleaned chimneys. The saloon was pretty crowded, and Linc saw John Tinsley sitting at a table near the back, his white beard shining and his pale eyes minding their own business with the superiority of a longhorn man. Linc Hull didn't disturb him; he found a blank space at the bar and ordered a whisky and bolted it down and ordered another. He usually drank slower.

He was on the third one when the doors flew open and R. N. Slaughter barged in. Hull watched him in the mirror, saw him look as if to make sure John Tinsley was there; and then he came over and pecked Linc on the shoulder.

Linc finished his drink then but he didn't turn around. "Go away."

"You're the hombre that beats up on everybody seen with Polly Black, ain't you?" Slaughter said loudly. "I was with her. I aim to be with her more; I aim to marry her."

Linc Hull turned around. "*She* say that?" He noticed that Tinsley wasn't even watching.

"She don't need to," Slaughter said. "I get what I want, son; an' I can whip any man an' break any horse."

"Fine," Linc said. "Now, go away."

Slaughter looked a little puzzled; and now John Tinsley got up from his table and came over. Slaughter clapped John on the back. "This son ain't got no stomach for fightin' *me*," Slaughter said.

Tinsley also looked puzzled, and there was a frown in his pale eyes. "Well, maybe he don't feel like fightin'."

"Like hell," Slaughter said. "I aim to show the lady."

LINC WASN'T ready for being grabbed, and Slaughter was strong. Slaughter pinned Hull's arms to his sides and Linc found himself being dragged out through the batwing doors. His head got bumped, and by the time Slaughter had him out on the road, Linc was as mad as he had been at Two Bit Watkins. He got a quick glimpse of Polly getting out of her chair on the porch and running into the hotel; and then he exploded out of Slaughter's bear hug, and he didn't wait for Slaughter to hit him first.

He Linc Hull clubbed Slaughter in the face and heard a bone crack; and Slaughter had started one that Linc's nose got in the way of, and it was like being hit with a cannon ball. They wrestled each other and clubbed each other; and Linc knew through the haze of pain, and the cloud of dust they had kicked up that he was losing blood. He was also losing his wind, and felt tired enough to fall down. Slaughter hit him again. It didn't hurt very much, and Linc realized that R. N. Slaughter was getting tired, too. He kept his arms close to his sides, and his fists in front of his face; some of the lead went out of them while Slaughter pawed at him a couple more times. Then he saw Slaughter's face for a second, sticking out clearly; Linc Hull put what he had left into a roundhouse right. Slaughter backed up the road about ten feet, paused for a moment, and then fell to his knees. He jerked a couple of times and then sprawled out flat.

Hull made himself stay on his feet until he was sure Slaughter would not be getting up for awhile. Then he sat down crosslegged in the middle of the

road, not wanting to fall down in front of Polly—who had come out on the hotel porch again—or the crowd that had come out of *Dacy's*. John Tinsley came over and looked down at him silently; then Polly came over and also looked down at him.

"Slaughter started that himself," Tinsley offered, looking at Polly.

"Well, Linc beat him," Polly said. She did not seem to be as angry as she had been about the Nueces fellow.

"That's because he's a longhorn man," Tinsley said.

Linc was not prepared for that, and it cleared his head a little. It seemed to him suddenly that John Tinsley was right. He could raise butterballs, because they were more profitable, and still be a longhorn man in spirit.

"Look here," he said to Tinsley, "if I round up them longhorns and drive them north will you give me enough to pay off Two Bit Watkins an' throw him out?"

"I reckon," Tinsley said; "but don't talk so loud.

Linc Hull didn't say anything more about it. He knew he could do it. It would be a great pleasure to throw Two Bit Watkins bodily off the Posie. He got to his feet, helped a little by both Tinsley and Polly. While Polly was pretty cool about it, Linc figured this meant something. He figured it meant that Polly would not object if a real longhorn man, who was nice, made a pass at her. But he would take care of that after he took care of the longhorns.

"I reckon I'll go home," he said.

"No," Tinsley said, "come by my place. I got a bottle. I want to tell you about the time we hit quicksand on an Arkansas crossing."

"All right," Linc said, getting a look at Polly out of the corner of his eye. If he kept feeling better, he would not wait so long to make a pass at her; possibly even tonight. "I want to hear about that."

Linc Hull headed for the boardwalk, John Tinsley and Polly beside him, with the unmistakable bearing of a longhorn man.

★

A Thrilling Novel of Renegade Menace

KING OF THE RANGE

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the vault, and the robbers stuffed two saddlebags with about $70,000. (To this date, tourists may go into the old bank vault from which this money was taken.) The robbery had been executed with such precision and speed that no one knew of it until it was over.

One of the tragedies of the holdup was the death of a young lad named Wymore, who was accompanying one Henry W. Haynes—a close friend of E. T. Estes of Kansas City—walking to William Jewell College.(Rev. Robert James, father of the James boys, was one of the original trustees of this college.) On their flight from the town the bandits were firing indiscriminately and yelling with savage fury. Mr. Haynes quickly jumped behind a tree, but young Wymore was not so fortunate. He was struck by a bullet and killed. These two young men were not interferring with the bandits in any way, and it is not known if Wymore was killed intentionally to show the citizens what they would do, or if it was accidental. At any rate, several days after the robbery, the Wymore family received the following note:

We regret the death of your son and hope you will believe it was an accident as we had no cause to kill him and never really meant to do so. You have our deepest sympathy.

Jesse and Frank James

Now this note could have been sent by anyone to point suspicion in the direction of the Jameses, and does not prove that they committed the robbery. On the other hand, one David Duncan—who owned a store at Cedarville, three miles from the James home—stated that he met them after the Liberty bank had been robbed. At first, he said that Frank and Jesse James were in the gang. Later, he decided he thought best to say that he did not know for sure—which, of course, was safer for him.

A POSSE followed the trail of the outlaws as far as the Mt. Gilead Church, where it was seen by the tracks that the party had divided into small groups or singles, so the pursuit ended.

The majority of the Clay County residents firmly believed that Jesse and Frank were there, or at least had instigated the affair. Friends of the Jameses stated that Jesse could not have been present, as he was still suffering from the lung wound he had received at the close of the war. Records indicate that Jesse lay for nearly a year after receiving the wound, seen and attended only by Dr. Lankford, of Kansas City, who nursed him back to health. Jesse was wounded in May of 1865; the robbery was in February of the following year. It is possible that he could have been there, but it would have been dangerous and foolish for him to ride a horse at that time. (The gaunt robber at Lexington, October, 1866, seems more and more to have been Jesse James.,

We state all these facts not in defense of Jesse, but only to bring all the incidents and material before the reader, so he may draw his own conclusion, whichever it may be. The robbery of the Russellville, Kentucky, bank in March of 1868 was actually the first type to be publicly attributed to the James gang.

Jim White and J. F. Edmunson were arrested in St. Joseph, shortly after the robbery, on suspicion of being implicated, but were released for lack of evidence. Many believed that these two, together with Bill Chiles, Ol Shepherd, Red Monkers, and Bud Pence, positively were among the band. Others believed that Arch Clements, Dick Burns, and Andy Maguire also were in the band. It is a known fact that Maguire spent money freely, soon after, and ran away to St. Louis with the daughter of Mr. Deering of Independence, Missouri. Maguire was cap-

tured at the old Seventh Street Depot in St. Louis and returned to Liberty, where he was promptly lodged in jail. In he same jail were several others suspected of being implicated in the robbery. Shortly after, Maguire was returned to Liberty; he and those suspected were taken from the jail by an irate mob and hanged.

Bud Pence had a brother named Don, who also had been a guerrilla under Quantrill. One day he learned that Stephen Major, a neighbor of the Jameses, had sold some cattle for a large sum, and conveyed the news to Jesse. This was shortly after the Liberty affair, and Jesse and Frank James, with Don Pence, went one night to the Major home with intent to rob him. Mrs. Major knew who they were, and was afraid that if she went upstairs to tell her husband, they would come in and kill him. So her sister detained them, while Mr. Major jumped out of an upstairs window and ran in his stocking feet to the home of Mr. Benton, a neighbor, and saved his money.

Another aftermath of the Liberty robbery was the arrest of an ex-guerrilla named Joab Perry, who was lodged in the jail at Indepenence. He was arrested on June 10th, 1866; and on the 14th, a group of well-armed men galloped into town at midnight. They immediately rode to the jail an demanded the release of Perry. Jailer Bugler refused to give up the prisoner and a number of shots were fired into his home. Bugler was instanty killed; his young son was seriously wounded, but recovered, to be later (of all things) accused of complicity in the train robbery at Glendale.

If anyone knew the identity of the raiders who failed in their purpose to release Perry, they said nothing. Everyone knew the desperate character of the Jameses and Youngers, and to have mentioned their suspicions might have brought about terrible reprisals.

★

A New "Simon Ark" Mystery

SERPENT IN PARADISE

by Edward D. Hoch

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DATE A DEADLY BLONDE

by Art Cleveland

don't miss the April

CRACK DETECTIVE and MYSTERY stories

Winter wasn't sure just what he saw over yonder.

THE BANSHEE SINGER

by Lon Williams

They said that the Bodep Opera House in Forlorn Gap was haunted, that a murdered opera singer awaited the man who had slain her there. And that man was believed to be Jason Inbred —the very gent whom Lee Winters had been assigned to track down!

DEPUTY MARSHAL Lee Winters drifted into Forlorn Gap shortly before midnight with mind confused and troubled. His gunfight at Hoodoo with a wanted monkey named Scrugg Amory had left him unnerved, his imagination conditioned for strange adventures.

At a sharp bridle pull, his horse Cannon Ball and their moon-cast shadow halted dustily. Good reason, there was, for such behavior. From an old building known in Forlorn Gap's uproarous days as Bodep Opera House, desultory singing was distinctly audible. Beyond its half-open door light could be seen, such as might have diffused itself from some hidden, over-large glowworm.

That singing voice was feminine, young, enchanting. Its quality of casual ease suggested that its owner sang for her own amusement, the way the deputy's wife, Myra, often did while cooking meals. As in other eerie situations, Winters told himself that this was something imagined. No entertainment had been offered here for three or four years. Bodep's was deserted, its glory but hazily remembered.

Yet while he listened and argued with himself, a creepy feeling made Lee Winters sleeve his face; uneasiness urged him to get away quickly. Afterwards he refused to look back, fearful of what he might have seen.

Two blocks from Bodep's, Forlorn Gap's only remaining saloon still had its lights going. Inside, its owner, Doc Bogannon, put away glasses in readiness for his customary midnight closing. Bogannon himself was of distinguished appearance—tall, broad-shouldered, with dark hair, broad forehead, and features which suggested high intelligence. Clearly nature had endowed him for great things. Nevertheless, for reasons undisclosed, Doc had chosen to make his way in this far-off, lonely town and live contentedly with his half-breed Shoshone wife.

He had reached up to extinguish his bar light when his batwings swung in-

ward and a slim weatherbeaten individual with dark mustache, spurs and sixgun strode in. "Winters!" he cried joyously. "Am I glad to see you!"

Winters advanced and slapped down his tribute. "Wine, Doc."

"Wine it is, Winters."

As Bogannon reached for glass and bottle, a high-pitched, complaining voice raised itself. "You couldn't make that two glasses now, could you, Mr. Bogannon?"

Winters turned and stared at a small-faced, seated critter of about fifty. "Who's your cuckoo, Doc?"

"My apology," said Bogannon. "He isn't cuckoo, exactly. Rather, he's afflicted with what you might call dreams. His name—and I'm not joking, Winters—is Rub Elbow."

"Nothing uncommon about that," returned Winters. "When I was a watersprout down in Texas, we had a neighbor some thirty miles across Trinity Bottoms called Standin Fencecorner. Always seemed to me right proper as a name."

"Beyond question," Bogannon nodded emphatically.

"Like I said," Elbow persisted plaintively, "I'm not one to turn down whiskey or wine, once it's offered."

"Notwithstanding you've already bummed two glasses off me," observed Bogannon.

DOC BOGANNON had poured for Winters. Lee picked up his glass and headed for Rub Elbow's table. "Fetch wine and two more glasses, Doc. they're on me; I never could abide seeing anybody unhappy."

Bogannon obliged promptly. Seated, he arched an eyebrow knowingly. "Elbow is troubled by dreams, Winters. If you were an astrologer or soothsayer, such talent might put you in great favor."

Elbow drank and licked his lips. "Now, sir, I never said anything about dreams. I said it reminded me of something."

Bogannon looked at Winters. "Elbow used to work at Bodep Opera House. Sort of butcher, baker and candlestick maker."

"No such thing," declared Elbow. "I was handy man. Wasn't nothing I couldn't do, give me proper tools."

"Where've you been, and why've you come back?" asked Winters.

Elbow twisted his mouth. "Some people will ask questions or bust."

"Elbow is not one to be squeezed of information," Bogannon explained. "It germinates, as a seed, from within."

Elbow nodded appreciatively. "All right, now. As I was saying, I was in St. Louis. Had me a cabinet shop there, I did. When I heard he'd escaped—"

"Who escaped?" asked Winters.

"Officer Winters, who's telling this, me or you?"

Bogannon interposed gently, "You are, of course, Mr. Elbow. Go right ahead."

"All right," said Elbow. "You see, I worked at Bodep's when *she* was there."

"She?" Winters asked suddenly.

Elbow looked his disdain. "Some people just don't know when to keep their mouths shut."

"As Doc would say, my apology," Winters returned sourly.

Bogannon intervened again. "You know how it is with men, Mr. Elbow; mention of women excites them. However, Officer Winters meant no harm."

Elbow drank his glass empty and watched approvingly while Doc refilled it. "Like I was saying, gentlemen," he resumed in good humor, "this Jason Inbred was in federal prison for mail robbery. When I heard he'd escaped, I says to myself, 'Rub Elbow, that reminds you of something.'

"That set me to thinking. 'What is it, Rub?' I says to myself. I can tell you one thing, gentlemen. When I put my mind to thinking, it's katy-begone-doggie. First thing you know, I've got it figured."

"I'd bet on that," declared Bogannon. "Wouldn't you, Winters?"

"But what about *she?*" demanded Winters.

"Didn't I tell you, Mr. Bogannon?" Elbow complained angrily. "Some men I don't know whether they ain't got no sense or ain't got no manners."

"I dare say that sometimes it's both," Bogannon commented, winking at Winters.

Elbow restored his equanimity with wine. "Yes, sir, gentlemen, Jason Inbred murdered her, but he didn't get her jewelry. Do you know why? Well, sirs, one day Miss Neverland says to me, 'Mr. Elbow,' she says, 'you're one friend I can trust. I want you to build a secret panel in my dressing room, where I can hide my jewelry. If you don't, some night while I'm singing somebody will steal me penniless.' That's what she says to me, gentlemen. That's what I'm thinking when I hears he's escaped from federal prison.

"I says to myself, 'Rub Elbow, Collinda Neverland had no kinfolks. Like others suspected of murder, I lit out, but nobody but me knowed where that jewelry was hid. According to law, finders is keepers.' Yes, sir, gentlemen, I'm bound to be rich."

Bogannon looked at his watch; its message alarmed him. "It's after midnight. I'm not superstitious, but no good can come of being open after twelve." He sprang up. "With your kind permission, gentlemen."

But again his batwings swung inward. This time they admitted a distinguished looking stranger of about thirty, with black mustache, pointed beard, and blue-green eyes.

He bowed gracefully. "Ah, sirs, I was afraid I'd be too late. Permit me, I am Ovid Train."

WINTERS chilled. Politeness and menace joined here in sinister alliance. Animal instinct made him slide his chair back in readiness for explosive action.

Bogannon said nervously, "I was just closing."

"Such inconvenience," said Train. He allowed his black coat to hang loose and expose an under-arm gun. "It pains me deeply, but one glass of wine, if you please."

Winters nodded at Bogannon. "What are a couple of minutes, more or less, Doc?"

"Of course," said Bogannon. He came to life and hurried behind his bar; a glass tinkled.

Winters glanced at Rub Elbow, found him staring, frozen white.

Ovid Train, also, had looked at Elbow. When his eyes joined those of Winters again, a flicker of recognition was just leaving them. He said with mild contempt, "When one gentleman introduces himself, other gentlemen usually reciprocate."

Bogannon had set up a glass. "Your drink, sir."

"One moment," Train responded, his gaze fixed upon Winters.

Winters, though sweating, refused to be intimidated. "Find out as best you can, stranger."

"You are talking to Deputy Marshal Lee Winters," Bogannon interposed. "I am Doc Bogannon. Our small friend there is Mr. Elbow."

Train bowed stiffly and advanced for his drink. He emptied his glass, paid, and strode out.

Winters listened with relief to his retreating footsteps, then eyed Rub Elbow coldly. "You knowed that bozo, didn't you?"

Elbow swallowed and shook his head vigorously. "Never saw him before in my life. No, sir."

"You, Doc?"

Bogannon pulled down his bar lamp, blew out its flame, came round and reached up for another. He said shakily, "Winters, I'm almost as scared as Mr. Elbow. I will say, however, that Train has an angry, discouraging feature here and there which I certainly

have seen before. But where?" Bogannon shook his head.

Winters gouged Rub Elbow and nodded for him to get out. When he was gone, Winters got up. "I'm confident both of you could've told me."

"Sorry, Winters, but I'm not sure. As a token of good faith, I'll put my mind to it, however."

"Yeah," Winters commented sarcastically. "And when you do, it'll be katy-begone-doggie. Good-night."

AFTER SUPPER with his charming young wife, Winters sat quietly before their living room fireplace and watched golden embers do their antics.

Myra eased down beside him. "Worried, Lee?"

He started, then assumed boldness. "Why would I be worried?"

"I'll bite, why?"

"Being a mind-reader, maybe you can figure it."

"All right, I figure you've seen a ghost."

"Ghosts don't exist," he declared stoutly. "What may look like one has always some explanation."

"Then you *have* seen one."

"You're hard to get around, young lady," he said, secretly proud of her perception. "Well, I was just thinking about deserted houses. Bodep Opera House, for instance."

"Ah-ha," Myra exclaimed triumphantly, "so it *was* a ghost."

"You mean there's a ghost at Bodep's?"

"Well, of course; Bodep's is haunted by a singing banshee."

Lee's scalp tingled. "You don't say!"

"I thought everybody knew that."

He swallowed and backhanded his mustache. "Any notion who this banshee could be?"

"Certainly."

He stared at her. "As simple as that, eh?"

"Sure. It's Collinda Neverland."

"Why her?"

"Because she was murdered there. You wouldn't remember; it's been over three years—happened before you came to Forlorn Gap. Collinda was a young singer, blue-eyed, blonde, dreamlike in beauty, yet with a smile which caused great division of opinion. Some said she smiled because she loved everybody, others that she was only amused, as if she regarded people as monkeys. This puzzle bothered nobody except a singer-actor named Jason Inbred; he settled it by murdering her."

"And got hung for it, no doubt?"

Myra shook her head. "He wasn't caught."

Winters mused for a while. "You went to Bodep's, I suppose?"

"Naturally. It was always crowded. Gold was plentiful then, and men who had it spent it."

"Gave this singer many presents, I reckon?"

"Everything imaginable. She had more jewels than one would know what to do with. Some thought it was to get her jewelry that Inbred murdered her; though others said it was from jealousy. Only one thing is certain—she was beautifully dead."

Winters tried to keep his thoughts pratical. "You could no doubt describe both of them?"

Myra leaned forward and rested her chin prettily on her right hand. "Well, yes. Collinda was sort of small and slim, so full of life, too, that when she danced she seemed to float on air. Sometimes when she sang, she whirled round and round, which made her voice sound real spooky. Jason Inbred was medium tall, straight, slender, elegant, but cold-mannered, haughty, and had queerness in his face. People remarked about his queer look, especially after he had murdered Miss Neverland."

Lee was impressed by Myra's assurance respecting what she'd told him. Nevertheless, it contained what he regarded as woman's reasoning. He asked pointedly, "How do you know Jason Inbred murdered Collinda Neverland?"

She sat erect. "How do I know?" she

replied archly. "Who else could have done it? He was her most persistent and ardent suitor; everybody knew that. She was found stabbed with a silver-plated dagger in her dressing room. It was his dagger. And he was never seen again. Isn't that proof enough?"

"Sure, sure," he answered. "That's proof aplenty. Which explains everything. Inbred murdered Collinda. Her ghost has come back to Bodep's to haunt him. But answer me this. How can she haunt him if he ain't there to be haunted?"

"I didn't say she was there to haunt her murderer, did I?"

"Oh, didn't you?"

"No, but I've got a sneaking notion; you've heard her singing, haven't you?"

"Nonsense!"

"And you've seen Jason Inbred, too, haven't you?"

"You ought to been a lawyer." He got up and patted her head. "Let's go to bed."

NEXT MORNING he was riding toward his office when he came upon a group of gold-diggers near Pepper Neal's store. They had formed a circle and were looking down.

Winters stopped his horse and peered over their heads. "What have you got there?"

Some drew back so he could see.

"It's a man, Winters," a miner told him. "Been tortured and strangled. See that cord round his neck?"

"Looks dead, don't he?" said Winters.

"He's as dead as he looks. Know him, Winters?"

Lee swung off for a closer look at his battered, bloody face. "Maybe some of you remember him. He's Rub Elbow."

Big Moss Tyner stared. "Sure, I remember; Elbow used to make hisself handy around Bodep Opera House."

Another said, "Elbow left these parts years ago."

Lee remounted. "Whatever his other business, right now it's with an undertaker. You men take care of it."

He continued to his office, searched through pictures of wanted monkeys, at last found what he sought—a print of Jason Inbred. He went to Doc Bogannon's saloon and showed Doc Bogie what he'd found.

"That's Inbred all right," declared Bogannon. "I remember him as a character actor. Talented impersonator. Could sing, as well."

"Any resemblance to Ovid Train?"

Bogannon mused. "Yes, I'd say so; with mustache and whiskers, Inbred might favor Train considerably."

Winters folded his poster and stored it in his vest. "Did you know your friend Rub Elbow got murdered last night?"

Bogannon was shocked. "No!"

"I figured he and Train knowed each other, Doc."

"There was sign of recognition; I noticed it myself."

"Another thing," said Winters. "I figure what brought Elbow back, also brought Train. It was a treasure hunt, Doc. Elbow knowed where it was hid. Got it tortured out of him; then strangled for silence."

Bogannon turned to a shelf. "Which reminds me, Winters: This letter came on Brazerville stage last night. 'Twas sent over this morning from Goodlett Hotel."

Winters tore into it and read aloud:

Dear Winters. Jason Inbred, in for mail robbery, has escaped prison. You'd know him. He used to play-act and sing in Forlorn Gap. Reported headed back there. Left word he won't be took alive. Take him, Winters. Yours truly. Hugo Landers, Marshal.

"LOOK FOR Ovid Train and you'll get your man," said Bogannon.

Winters considered briefly. "Maybe I don't want him, Doc."

"I can well understand that. Perhaps if you'd wait around town—"

"Or go home and hide," Winters cut in. "No, Doc, I reckon I've got to track him down."

Several hours he searched in Forlorn Gap, then he learned that a man answering Train's description had ridden north early that morning. Having murdered Rub Elbow, Train likely would hide for a while. If low on funds, he'd be robbing somebody at a distance. His search of Bodep Opera House could wait, now that Elbow was dead.

In late afternoon, his search extended northward, Winters pulled Cannon Ball up short on a high mountain trail that overlooked Pangborn Road. A stagecoach drawn by four black horses and swinging round curves toward Pangborn Gulch had caught his attention.

Immediately he witnessed such a drama as he'd heard of, but had never before seen. A lone rider emerged from behind a ledge and signalled a halt with one shot from his forty-five. Within seconds a gun-guard was shot, a stage robbed of its mailbag and passengers of their valuables. Winters was too far away to intervene, yet close enough to observe important details.

That lone robber who calmly sat his horse and watched his victims disappear, held himself like Ovid Train. Removal of his mask disclosed Train's pointed black beard. His gun had gone into an under-arm holster.

Another significant detail was not overlooked. Train did not ride on Pangborn Road, but turned into a canyon, one remembered by Winters as having a dead end.

Descent to Pangborn Road required circuitous riding of about three miles. Dusk had fallen before Winters reached Train's hideout trail. Meantime, however, Winters had thought of a plan. Train, unaware of pursuit, would build a campfire at dark. That campfire would be his betrayer.

Winters moved cautiously. Memory told him there was a drip spring some miles ahead. There likely was where Train would camp. When a hundred yards from its location, Winters dismounted, ground-hitched and advanced on foot.

Woodsmoke gave warning. Soon afterwards he glimpsed firelight. With sixgun drawn and cocked, he leaped round a shoulder of rock. "Don't move," he commanded fiercely.

Surprise reacted quickly in both directions. What Winters saw was not his handsomely attired robber. Instead, a man with bush whiskers and a prospector's baggy, scuffed shirt, trousers and boots stared at him, startled and puzzled.

"Don't skeer me like that, stranger. Old man Tweed Eadle ain't got nothin' you want."

Winters, though likewise startled, retained his guard. "Sorry, oldtimer. You ain't him I expected to find."

"I'd hope to say not. Old Tweed Eadle shore never bothered nobody. Set in and have a bite of broiled venison. It ain't frequent that two visitors drop by in one night."

"Two?" said Winters.

Eadle nodded. "Two. First was him as looked in a hurry. Seeing that badge on your vest makes me think you're an officer, maybe chasin' that other feller."

"You guess right," said Lee. "I'm Deputy Marshal Lee Winters of Forlorn Gap."

"I'VE HEERD of you, Winters. It's said here and there you're right quick with that shootin'-iron of yours. I ain't one to meddle, whether business meddled with be lawful or unlawful, but I don't mind telling you something."

"Tell it, Eadle."

"It'll save you needless riding, Winters; you're on a cold trail. That feller you're after stopped by for a drink of water and asked how he could get to

Fudge Around, then from there back to Forlorn Gap. Not knowing he was a badman I says to him, 'Well, stranger,' I says, 'you sure won't get to Fudge Around by riding further into this box canyon.' And he says to me, 'You mean this canyon is deadended?' And I says, 'You don't reckon I'd prospect these mountains for ten years and not find that out, do you?' That throwed him. You can figure what he done."

"What did he do?"

"Why, sir, he swung onto his horse and rode out of here."

Winters felt uneasy, sensed nervously that from some dark fissure a gun pointed toward him. Back of Tweed Eadle, unknown articles were wrapped in dirty canvas. Lee gazed suspiciously, then asked severely, "What did your other visitor look like?"

Eadle quietly turned his broiling steak. "Well, Winters, he was about as tall as you, but somewhat heavier. Much handsomer, too. Not such a dried-up strand of rawhide as you be. Maybe younger than you, too, but pushing thirty."

When he sensed danger he couldn't see, Winters figured that it was time to high-tail. He backed slowly out of sight then despite darkness retreated at a brisk walk. When Cannon Ball was under him again, he made horse tracks.

He was hitching in front of Bogannon's before truth began to shine. "Beconfound!" he muttered angrily.

That scoundrel who'd called himself Tweed Eadle was Ovid Train in disguise. Winters had forgotten that Train, as Jason Inbred, had been an actor. Now that he remembered it, Eadle's voice had sounded strained; nor had disguise completely hidden his look of queerness.

Bogannon, alone at a table, looked up startled as his batwings swung inward. "Winters! I'd been wishing you'd come. Sit down; I'll fetch wine."

Satisfied no one else was present, Winters advanced and sat. "Doc, something's got you scared."

Bogannon returned and poured drinks. "Winters, lately I'm beginning to see things."

"Oh, see now, Doc," Winters scoffed. "Nobody but me ever sees things."

"It's nothing to be facetious about, Winters." Bogannon nodded toward an elevated cabinet behind his bar. "Do you see that souvenir cabinet?"

Winters had known it was there, yet had never given it much thought. "Of course, I see it."

"And observe that its glass door is open?"

"Sure."

"Do you see that silver-plated dagger that was given to me by Marshal Hugo Landers himself?"

Winters stared and blinked. "Doc, it's gone."

"That was Jason Inbred's dagger. It killed Miss Collinda Neverland." Bogannon refilled their glasses. "You won't believe this, Winters, but unless I'm crazy it happened. Shortly before your arrival I was sitting here to rest from a busy evening, when my batwings swung in, as if a gust of wind had driven them open only to let them go again. I saw nothing. Seconds later that cabinet door swung open. My silver-plated dagger rose from its pegs and descended out of sight. Once more those batwings swung, this time outward." Bogannon wiped his face with a handkerchief. "Borrowing your own words, Winters, I don't figure it."

Winters sleeved his own face. "I don't figure it myself, Doc."

BOTH OF them stilled at a distant sound of hoofbeats. A horse galloped nearer and nearer, at last stopped at the hitch-rail. Batwings swung, and a man strode in. At sight of Winters he stopped and tensed for action.

"It's Ovid Train," Bogannon exclaimed with forced hospitality. "Join us, Train. You're just in time for a nightcap."

Winters, seated, had been caught un-

ready. In a play for time, he nodded toward a chair opposite himself. "Set down, Train; drinks will be on me."

Train advanced haughtily and sat down. "I pay for my own, sir."

Winters had glimpsed Train's underarm gun. That its owner could kill in cold blood had been demonstrated on Pangborn Road. Duty required that he arrest this murderer, yet he hesitated, deterred by Train's flinty watchfulness.

Discretion warned that he should surprise his intended victim. To that end he said off-handedly, "You travel late, don't you?"

Train showed no friendliness. "Any laws against it?"

"Could be," replied Winters.

"Name one."

Winters calculated distances. Train's gunhand was close to its weapon. Tension in Train's face warned that he might not wait for Winters to move first. Advantage was his. Lee's design to put Train off guard had failed. Effects were otherwise. Train was going to kill him. Though both of them would likely die, it was certain that Winters could not escape.

Bogannon had paused nearby with a glass for Train. Suddenly he eased it back on his bar.

Winters himself detected change. Jason Inbred, alias Ovid Train, had relaxed his guard; his attention shifted. Just when he'd had things his way, he assumed an attitude of rapt listening. His lips formed a word that emerged as a whisper.

"Collinda!"

Winters, too, relaxed his tension. Bogannon's place had filled with music. A girl was singing. Though it came from a distance, her voice was clear, distinct, incredibly sweet.

Slowly Train rose. Unmindful of Winters and Bogannon, he turned away and headed out, as one dreaming.

Nor was Winters immune to enchantment. Collinda Neverland was singing. That was certainty in his mind. Her ghostly voice was alive with promise. Its charm disturbed his contact with reality. It inspired visions of open gates, revealed wondrous lands beyond their portals. In fancy he felt himself within touch of blissful eternity.

He, too, got up. "Let's go, Doc."

Bogannon's voice shook. "No, Winters; what you hear is a song of death."

Winters, determined not to part with reality, felt drawn by tremendous forces, nevertheless. Bogannon's warning fell upon a mind willing, but unable, to receive it.

OUTSIDE, Winters paused briefly. Then, perceiving Train moving trancelike toward Bodep Opera House, he strode after him.

He was almost at Bodep's entrance, when he drew up resolutely. Train had disappeared inside. There was no certainty that Train would continue under a spell. Winters knew how easy it was to walk into a trap, how difficult it was to escape one.

Moonlight fell brightly round him. Despite his resolution to keep steady and alert, he was attended already by illusions of strangeness. Moonbeams seemed to quiver, as if shaken. Collinda's voice—he never considered that it could have been other than hers—continued its entrancing song. Its words were foreign, and to him unimportant. What he heard was music. Sweet and eerie, mingled with this strange glory-light around him, it inspired forgetfulness, invited and drew him onward.

He entered. He advanced slowly not from caution, but because other power than his own held him in captivity.

Inside, he at first was aware only of vast, dark emptiness, with small patches illuminated by moonlight through high windows. Ovid Train stood in one of those patches.

Below them was a broad stage, dimly seen, its curtain raised, its rear screens arranged as for a play. Centrally thereon pale light glowed, an illumination

unassociated with source or shadow. It was from that light that singing emanated. Winters, staring enraptured, thought he saw a young woman there. Certain he was that Bodep's gloom dissolved until walls, floor, old benches, even cobwebs, became visible, as in twilight.

For an instant he was sure he saw her, beautiful in shining white. It was in that instant that she stilled, except for her voice. When she moved, indistinctness resulted. As her song intensified to high excitement, that glow which surrounded her revolved, its central core became dense and brilliant.

Presently her voice rose and fell in evenly spaced variations of pitch. Dreamily Winters remembered what Myra had said. *When Collinda danced, she seemed to float on air. Sometimes when she sang, she whirled round and round, which made her voice sound real spooky.*

Suddenly Winters gasped. There, touched by light on a small table, lay Bogannon's souvenir—the silver-plated dagger.

Then, while Winters looked and listened, a change took place. Singing subsided. What he had seen as whirling light faded. His breathing slowed until he glanced at a spot near to him, when it instantly stilled.

Train had disappeared.

Winters squeezed his forehead, shook his head vigorously. No longer did he realize where he was or how he'd come be there. He experienced sensations of danger, comdemned himself for folly he could not explain.

Light reappeared.

This time it was he who was enveloped. In panic, he turned to flee.

Then he saw her. She stood before him, blocked his retreat.

"Miss Neverland!" he whispered, his throat tight.

"Yes, Winters," she replied calmly. "I am Collinda Neverland."

She was as Myra had described her, small, slender, dreamlike in beauty. She did not have that smile which had caused great division of opinion. Rather, she looked sad and forlorn.

Winters tried to swallow. He said squeakily, "Sorry I spied on you like this. If you'll let me by, I'll be on my way."

She remained unmoved, said in disappointment. "I had not expected you, Winters. Why did you come?"

He gulped and said something about duty. "I come to arrest a murderer."

"You shouldn't have bothered. Since you've troubled yourself, however, you may come with me."

"W-where are we going?"

Her manner was surprisingly exultant then. "Jason Inbred has come back. He is even now searching for my jewels."

"H-he's my man," said Winters. "W-where's he looking?"

"He is in my dressing room. Come, I will show you."

She moved round him and lighted his way down a long aisle, up a flight of steps and along a back-stage corridor. Ahead of them, light spread from a side room.

COLLINDA stopped, faced Winters again. "I have no relatives, Winters, nor any loved one. Nor have I, in my present abode, further need for rubies and diamonds. You are known to be generous, kind, and altogether deserving. What I have, therefore, I give to you. After tonight you will never see or hear me again. There are thirty panels in my room. Beginning at its door and proceeding left, count them bottom up to seven, across to five, then down to three. Press three, then seven, then five, and you will have them. Now, if you are truly brave."

She moved on. At her dressing room door she disappeared. Winters, scared stiff, stepped inside, his gunhand slapping frantically, but vainly, for his gun.

Inbred, thumping one panel after

another along a wall, turned at a sound and saw him. On a dressing table a candle burned; its flame tossed a flickering light. Inbred stared for an instant, then went for his gun. But suddenly there was no light.

Winters clawed at his empty holster, thought that either he had gone mad or that he was in a dreadful nightmare. With inspiration conceived in deadly peril, he dropped flat on his face. Flame stabbed from Inbred's gun until six shots had roared deafeningly.

Awe-inspiring silence followed. Winters stared into smoke-filled blackness.

If there were such things as miracles, he was sure he witnessed one then. Over by Inbred pale light appeared. Winters saw Inbred standing there, lips parted in terror. He turned slowly, eyes wide as if staring at approaching doom.

He screamed, "No! No!"

Winters saw what he supposed Inbred had seen—a shining dagger, pointed at Inbred's heart. It drew away, poised for an instant, then in a curving sweep plunged itself home.

Inbred's scream encompassed all that was imaginable respecting terror and pain. His collapse, slow at first, ended with a thud and a sigh. Even Winters, whose sympathy for erring mortals was slight, felt pity.

When Inbred had fallen, Winters felt a touch at his side. Warily he moved his right hand to discover what had touched him. He found his gun in its holster. there was no other touch, nor any other sound.

★

Colorado, Here I Come!

Special Feature by BESS RITTER

IT'S INTERESTING to note that slogan, "See America First," was coined by an American who hired native German artists to invent Colorado scenery that would illustrate the phrase. His name was Shadrack K. Hooper, who, in his day, was the Number O..e Barnum of Mountain pressmen. He was responsible for a large portion of the railroad advertising that was put out from the 1870's until about 1910, for Eastern Consumption, which grossly exaggerated the terrifying aspects of the mountains. Millions of mailing pieces went out, showing trains that calmly mastered spectacular, corkscrew peaks, and precipices that couldn't possibly be scaled—but were. And since the lithography and color work in Germany was far superior to anything that could be obtained west of the Mississippi, the work was "farmed out" overseas.

As a results, most of the hair-raising representations of the Rockies were actually pictures of the Bavarian Alps, executed by artists who'd never seen the American West. And many an Eastern traveler who finally did get to go over the narrow gauge roads of Colorado, held some terrifyingly illustrated pamphlet in his lap, supplied by the train conductor, and literally forced his imagination to convince him that what he was examining from his window must somehow live up to the picture that he held.

★

The man with the rifle had a familiar look. . .

LOBO TRAP

by Wallace McKinley

The Ebony Gang was too slick for Sheriff Wheeler to find . . . so the only thing to do was to induce them to come out into the open . . .

CONCHO, lusty desert mining town, dozed in the fierce heat of a late afternoon sun. Quiet reigned except for the unceasing clatter of the stamps from the mills clustered at the foot of Eagle Mountain. The dusty street was almost deserted. The town would not come to life until the day shift came out of the shafts

driven deep into the breast of the mountain.

Luke Morey appeared in the doorway of the adobe stage office. He was as lean as a rawhide lash, battered black hat brushed the top of the door frame. The expression on his long, thin face was solemn, almost doleful as he squinted across the widesweep of sage-dotted mesa. Slowly he raised one hand, rubbed his lean jaw thoughtfully.

Off in the distance where the road dipped down into Cottonwood Canyon, a dust cloud marked the course of the approaching stage. Luke's eyes narrowed; his lounging form straightened. The dust was trailing out rapidly. Tom Riley was pushing his horses hard. Which was strange. Unless——

Luke turned his head. A man sauntered around the corner of the building. The hair showing under the brim of his hat was a flaming red. Twinkling blue eyes held a gleam of recklessness. Old friends, these two. Luke Morey, philosopher and stage driver, Clem Doyle, erstwhile puncher, now guard for the stages running between Concho and Silver City.

"Your conscience botherin' you, Luke? Or is it bunions?"

"Neither one, sonny. Been watchin' Tom Riley rolling up the dust. The heat's got him, or the devil is treading close on his hocks."

Doyle's face hardened as he studied the lengthening dust banners. "A bunch o' devils, more likely. Callin' themselves the Ebony Gang. If they got old Tom. . ."

He did not finish. In grim silence the two watched the approach of the fast traveling stage.

Behind four blown and lathered horses the stage swept into Concho. Morey was beside the heavy coach before it stopped. The driver swayed on the seat. Beneath a coating of dust, his features showed drawn and bloodless. He tried to speak; a crimson froth dyed his lips. He crumpled suddenly, like a paper figure caught by the wind. Luke caught him as he pitched forward.

A crowd was gathering as they carried Tom Riley into the stage office. The murmur of excited talk carried into the quiet of the room. Straightening his long frame, Luke looked across the limp form of the old driver into the eyes of his friend.

"Hit three times. Wonder if he lived long enough to get the stage in."

A soft oath came from Doyle's lips. "The sneakin' hounds! It's going to be mighty hard on Tom's missus and the kids."

Morey's face was expressionless, but little pinpoints of light glittered in his eyes. It was indeed a cheerless future that Tom Riley's widow faced. For her husband, like most of his kind, had lived with no thought of the morrow.

Luke turned his head as Concho's sheriff, Bart Wheeler, entered the room. A moment or two Wheeler looked down into the set features of the dead driver. Then he lifted his head, asked a question.

"Tom's light went out 'fore he could say anything," Luke answered.

Wheeler's heavy shoulders sagged, there were lines on his face that made him look old, tired. "Another job we can charge up to the Ebony Gang, I reckon."

"Seems that way," Luke nodded. "Only this time, Sheriff, the stage wasn't carrying any treasure."

The two men regarded each other steadily. "Meanin' it was Riley they was after?"

"Just that. It was Tom who kept them from lifting the strong box two weeks ago. They were after Tom's scalp to serve notice on the rest of us—that's my guess."

Wheeler's lips tightened. Then, with a scuffle of booted feet, two men entered the little office. Both were miners. They had, it appeared, been the only passengers in Tom Riley's coach, and their story confirmed Luke Morey's theory. The stage had been

pulling up the heavy grade when the gang announced their presence by a burst of gunfire from the brush. No attempt had been made to stop the stage. The passengers had had a brief glimpse of three masked men, that was all.

Wheeler pulled at his drooping mustache, spoke heavily. "'Twas Riley they was after, a'right."

"Yeah," Clem Doyle put in. His head was thrust forward, blue eyes snapping coldly. "Question is, Bart, what you aim to do about it?"

"Everything I know how," the Sheriff replied, but there was a baffled, despairing look in the back of his eyes. "It ain't easy. Some clever head is runnin' this gang. They allus know when to hit and where; most folks are afraid even to talk about 'em. And with all the hard cases hangin' out in the Alkalis, an army could go in there and come back with nothin' much to show—'cept bullet holes, maybe."

"Well, by Godfrey, something's got to be done!" Doyle snapped. "And if the Sheriff's office can't do it—"

"Hold on, redhead." Morey laid a restraining hand on his friend's arm. "Bart is right. We'd all like a crack at this outfit, but we've got to find 'em first. Jaw fighting won't help nail their hides to the fence."

"Were you thinking of going hide-hunting?" There was a hint of mockery in the voice. Luke turned slowly to face the speaker. His eyes narrowed as he met the challenging stare of the slender, carefully groomed figure in the doorway. Milt Weir was the owner of the *Nugget*, Concho's largest palace of chance. He was a well-known figure in the mining town and somewhat of a mystery, as well. Weir's past was a closed book. There was something in the murky black eyes, in the set of his thin lips that discouraged inquisitiveness.

"Not me. I've got a job and it ain't hunting ary Ebony Gang." Luke's lips twitched in a grave smile. "Collectin' lead never was a hobby o' mine."

"A cautious soul." There was thinly veiled contempt in Weir's voice. "But your redheaded friend—maybe he'd like to loop these holdups?"

Doyle grunted. "Way things have been going, it's a sight safer to stick up stages....and more profitable. But I don't reckon it's necessary to tell you that, Weir."

Wicked lights kindled in the murky eyes. But the gambler's face was expressionless, his voice was smooth, quiet but with a flat note of menace. "Nobody ever got lockjaw keeping his mouth shut. I'd think that over, Doyle."

The crowd in front of the stage office had dispersed, twilight settled over the awakening mining town. At the corral, Luke's cigaret made a glowing spot of color in the dusk. Clem Doyle stirred, spoke meditatively. "They's a ten thousand reward out for this Ebony gang. Maybe you was kind of hasty, tellin' Weir you didn't aim to go hide hunting."

Luke's voice was a soft drawl. "Not any. Fella who tries collectin' rewards is likely to collect lead first. Now I've got an idee that beats that all hollow. Listen, redhead..."

THE STAGE was an hour out of traveling rapidly down the winding descent of Cottonwood Gulch. In the driver's seat, Luke Morey swayed easily to the motion of the coach, his eyes fixed on the road ahead. Behind him, the two guards maintained a sharp vigil. Experience had shown that the Ebony Gang had ways of finding out when bullion shipments went out from the Concho mines. The bandits might not strike this time; but if they did, it would be with deadly swiftness.

The road made a wide loop where a narrow side canyon broke through the black lava walls. The ruts wound down from the gloomy entrance, the old road leading to a long since deserted mining camp. The dry brush stirred as a puff of hot wind came up the canyon. There

was no other sign of life. But brake blocks shrilled loudly as Luke pulled the trotting horses to a halt.

The metallic click of a shotgun hammer going back was followed by the thud of a blow and a stifled groan. Without looking around, Luke swung lightly to the ground.

The lone passenger put his head out of the window, apprehension plain on his features. "What—What's goin' on? Is it a holdup?"

"You might call it that," Luke admitted. "Climb out, fella, and don't get festive. Might bring on a sudden attack o' heart failure."

The passenger gasped, his eyes widened as he regarded the shining Colt that had appeared in the tall driver's hand. He did not wait to argue the point, but fairly tumbled out of the stage.

Luke relieved him of his gun. Glancing up, he saw Doyle grinning at him. "Roddy is dozin' for a spell. Naw, he ain't hurt. I tapped him real easy-like. Hey, you! Grab aholt and ease him down."

The passenger obeyed. Already the guard was beginning to groan and stir. Luke wasted no time. Hoisting himself back into the seat, he released the brake. The horses lunged into their collars as the long whip popped over their backs. The coach turned sharply into the ruts of the old road, disappeared in a swirling dust cloud.

THE SMELL of dawn was in the air, its grey skirmish line advancing along the eastern horizon. Under the desert stars, the mineral-coated surface of Desolation Sink glimmered faintly. Outlined against the white background were two riders, Luke Morey and Clem Doyle. They rode in silence, slouched comfortably in the saddles but alert for the first sign of danger.

It was certain that the Sheriff and a posse were on their trail. But the danger of capture by the law was not a pressing one. For ahead, looming darkly against the sky, was the granite bulk of the Alkali Range. Before long the partners would be climbing the gravel fan spewed out from the mouth of Dungeon Canyon. And at the end of that deep, narrow gash in the living rock was Sky High. A tough camp, sanctuary for some of the worst renegades in a dozen states. In Sky High was only one law, that of Judge Colt.

Morning was driving the shadows from the sink when the horses climbed the last ascent of the fan. Huge masses of rock littered the canyon's mouth. From the dank depths came a whispering breath of wind. To Morey, it was like a warning of danger. No sound broke the brooding hush, but his muscles tightened. For an instant, his fingers brushed the butt of the Colt in its shoulder holster. No matter what peril lurked in the canyon, they could not turn back. Safety, if such it could be called, lay with the lawless inhabitants of the camp in its natural stronghold high in the mountains.

There was a creak of leather as Doyle leaned closer to his partner. His eyes gleamed in the shadow of his hat brim. "Don't jest like the feel o' things, Luke. I smell trouble."

"Which is something we can expect to find most anyplace," Morey replied with grim brevity. "We know what's behind; got to take a chance on what lies ahead."

The horses had caught the uneasiness of their riders. They moved forward slowly, following the trail that wound among the rocky masses. The clink of the shod hoofs woke little echoes. Luke's eyes shuttled ceaselessly over the sterile desolation of the canyon's mouth. As they advanced, the tension increased rather than lessened.

Luke's horse gave the first alarm. A quiver ran through the animal's muscles; he lifted his head, sensitive ears pointed forward. His rider's gaze flashed to the shattered granite ledge, scarring the canyon wall just above

them. A movement like the shifting of a shadow, caught his eyes.

The horse reared as Luke wrenched at the bit, shouldering Doyle's grey. The snarl of a rifle answered the maneuver. Luke went out of the saddle in a dive. As he struck the ground, he whirled with the speed of a great cat. Answering the whiplike report of the rifle was a rippling crash of four shots, so closely spaced they blended into one blast of firing.

From behind the ledge a man suddenly stood erect. He clawed at his chest slid clattering down the rock. Slowly he twisted on his heel to fall heavily.

"Got him!" Clem grunted savagely.

Morey slipped fresh cartridges into the long barrelled Colt. His expression was wooden, but his eyes held the cold glitter of a swooping eagle's. "Keep a sharp look-out. Snakes are likely to run in pairs."

Like a shadow, he slid in among the rocks. Taking advantage of every bit of cover, he worked his way up to the ledge. Not until he was sure that the hidden marksman had been alone did he step out into the open. Kneeling swiftly beside the sprawled figure, his lips curled in a mirthless smile. "Thought so!" he said under his breath. A moment longer he looked at the set features of the dead man. Then swiftly, expertly he searched him.

When Luke Morey rejoined his companion, Clem questioned him with a look. "Our fast-shootin' friend wasn't exactly a stranger. Weir is going to miss his pet poodle."

"So it was Dode Quinn!" Clem exclaimed. "By godfrey, Luke, you reckon that means Weir is tied into this thing?"

"I have got a notion that way," Morey retorted grimly. "Quinn was out of town considerable, lookin' over mining prospects for Weir, he claimed. But I'm wondering if he needed this in the mining game."

He held out something black and shapeless. Doyle leaned forward to peer at it. An oath broke from his lips.

"The Ebony Gang! And Weir and Quinn as thick as thieves. No wonder the gang knowed where and when to hit their licks with Weir passin' them their orders. You figure Quinn was layin' for us?"

Luke shook his head. "Nope. Recollect, Quinn wasn't in town when we pulled out with the stage. My idee is he was at Sky High and heading back for town when he seen us coming. Could be he figured we were on the trail of Tom Riley's killers. Anyhow, he decided to put us out of the way."

"Believe you've hit it. And that means the gang's hideout is in Sky High. Chances are, we'll run into the whole bunch there."

"Can happen," Luke shrugged. "If Weir ain't in camp, I'll gamble he's burning the sand in this direction. We'll find the answer after we pull into Sky High."

AT THE SUMMIT of Dungeon Canyon the partners drew rein. Clem Doyle twisted in the saddle, squinting back into the depths of that mighty gash in the living rock. His lips puckered in a soundless whistle.

"Man couldn't ask a better hideout. No Sheriff's going to sneak up on him —not up that canyon."

"You're not the first fella to figure that out," Morey replied dryly. "I have heard that most of the boys up this way are plumb Sheriff-shy."

"We ought to be right in style."

"I'm wonderin' about that. If news of the disappearance of the stage—and the strongbox—hasn't drifted up this way, Weir will know about it. Recollect, we're alla same a ticket to thirty thousand in gold bullion, way the gang will look at it. Won't take 'em long to figure we cached it along our backtrail."

His expression was gloomy. "Looks like a man can't find peace and quiet nowheres. Might as well take a job

sheriffin' and get paid for huntin' trouble."

Clem snorted. "Can't expect anything different. Not with you built like a lightning rod; you draw trouble same as it does thunderbolts."

The partners entered Sky High valley at its lower end. A long, narrow trough between soaring cliffs, with the road snaking down the center to the huddle of buildings. As they rode into the camp, Luke's eyes were sharp under drooping lids. Sky High had a reputation even among the tough towns of the Nevada and California deserts. It was with a magnet that attracted desperate men with an itching desire to find a refuge from the law.

Both curious and hostile glances were levelled at them as they rode down the rutted road. Sky High's citizens were hard-faced, cat-eyed for the most part. But if Luke read any menace in their slit-eyed regard he gave no sign; only mild interest showed on his long face.

The partners rode up to the Ace Corral, just beyond the Hard Rock Hotel. As they dismounted from their weary ponies, a man came out of the stable. He was small and scrawny, his greeting as colorless as his person. After unsaddling and depositing their gear in the stable, Morey addressed a casual question to the listless proprietor. "Milt Wier leave any word for us?"

The watery blue eyes blinked rapidly, alarm showed on the man's face. "Nope. I dunno nothin' about it. He didn't say nothin', anyhow." And with that he turned and scuttled hastily into the stable.

"And what was the idee askin' that fool question?" Clem demanded when they were out of earshot.

"Wanted to know how well Weir was known here," Luke replied placidly. "He must be a regular old he-wolf in these diggin's, way that rabbit laid back his ears and loped for his burrow."

In spite of Morey's prediction that Weir would ride post haste for Sky High, the day passed without incident. When dusk rolled quietly down from the sheer peaks that gleamed above the little valley, the gambler had not shown himself. From a position in front of the Hard Rock Hotel, the partners watched lights appear along the darkening street. No one seemed to be paying them any particular attention. Sky High was absorbed in minding its own business. But Luke knew they were being watched. Trouble was headed their way at a high lope with the bit in its teeth.

Clem's cigaret made a glowing arc as he flicked it out into the street. He spoke fretfully. "What are these fellahs waitin' for? Trouble, huh! I seen more excitement at a Sunday school picnic."

"Keep your shirt on," Luke advised quietly. "That scar-faced gent at the supper table, now; maybe you noticed him eyein' us like a hungry wolf? Right at present, they's two more fellas across the street keepin' cases on us. Things are shapin' up for a hot time right quick."

Even as he spoke, his sharp gaze caught a movement at the further end of the hotel porch. Instantly he felt the quick, savage uplift of spirits that the presence of danger always brought him. He felt something touch his sleeve, glanced down and met his partner's eyes. Nodding, he spoke lazily: "Time for us to be driftin', I reckon."

The two moved forward without any appearance of haste. From behind the corner of the building, a figure stepped out directly in their path. "Just a minute, Morey. I've been looking for you."

"That so!" Luke exclaimed. He recognized Weir instantly, and at the same time was aware of the two men who had materialized from the shadows behind them. Another pair were crossing the street. The showdown was coming quicker than he had expected.

WEIR TOOK a step forward, bringing the two face to face at close

range. "Didn't expect to see me here, did you, Morey?"

"I ain't exactly overcome with surprise," Luke declared. "Anything special on your mind?"

"Well, there is. I was wondering if you heard about the stage being robbed. It seems the thieves got away with some thirty thousand in gold. Bart Wheeler was real put out about it."

"Seems I did hear something about it, Luke drawled easily. "You on the trail of the holdups, Milt?"

"In a way, yes. Oh, not for the reward. I wanted to suggest that these—gentlemen—let me handle the bullion for them. For safe keeping, of course. So much gold might go to their heads."

"Sounds reasonable," Luke rubbed his long chin reflectively. "Only these fellas—when you find them—might have other idees."

"Never mind the play-acting!" Weir's voice had sharpened, carried an undernote of menace. "The two of you played a clever game, but you've reached the end of your string. I want to know where you cached the bullion; and when I want something, I find a way to get it."

Luke felt his pulses quicken. Weir's men where closing in.

There was still time, if he acted quickly. He opened his mouth, Clem Doyle's hot retort cut him off short.

"You and your Ebony Gang'll be in hell a long time 'fore you get anything out of me!"

"Feel like that about it, do you?" Weir asked, his voice a gentle purr. Snake-like, his hand slid down to his side.

"Don't you!" Luke said icily. He jammed the barrel of the Colt into Weir's belly. "Get your hand away from that gun. That's better. And I wouldn't try callin' to your friends; before they can get me, you'll be as Ben Adams old mule!"

He heard the sharp hiss of Weir's indrawn breath. In spite of his iron control, the gambler's voice trembled with passion. "This trick is just about going to get you killed, Morey."

"I wouldn't count too strong on that." With a deft movement, Luke secured Weir's gun. "Now suppose you tell the boys the three of us are going to have a little pow-wow. Sort of hint for them to wait here."

An instant only Weir hesitated; then as the gun barrel nudged him suggestively, he spoke jerkily: "Wait here, boys, while I have a little talk with our—friends."

Following orders, Weir turned away. Instantly Luke stepped close to his side. To the watchers, it merely seemed that the two men departed almost arm in arm. For Luke had skilfully shifted the sixgun so that it pressed against the gambler's ribs.

The little procession proceeded silently to the corral gate. Luke addressed his partner. "Slap our gear on the best nags you can locate."

Doyle faded into darkness. With the captive, Luke moved toward the deeper shadows beside the stable. Weir stopped. What are you figuring to do with me?"

"Aimed to lock you up," Luke returned gently. "For safe keepin', you might say."

"Don't be a fool!" Weir growled. "Look here, Morey, you've got brains; I can use a man like you. Throw in with me, and we can run things in this part of the country."

"Now that's real interestin'," Luke conceded. "Only I never was partial to teaming up with a shunk; don't like the smell none."

Weir shrugged. "Sorry you take it that way." He started to turn, sidestepped like a flash and grabbed for the gun. Luke struck the clutching fingers down. At the same moment he smashed the barrel of the Colt across the gambler's temple; Weir crumpled soundlessly.

Doyle was leading the horses out when his tall companion appeared silently at his side. They mounted hasti-

ly. We'll take the back way," Luke directed, low-voiced. "Some of the boys figure on us becomin' permanent residents; no sense in lettin' 'em know we got other notions."

A HOT BREEZE stirred in the draw, whipping up the powdery dust and heralding the approach of another day of blistering heat. Shading his eyes against the level ray of the rising sun, Luke Morey looked down to where the draw lost itself in Mineral Sink. A group of bobbing figures came into sight around a shoulder of granite.

The tall driver spoke his thoughts aloud. "Not over two miles behind. And from the looks o' things I'd say they picked up fresh horses after they left Sky High."

Clem touched dry lips with his tongue. "And ours most wore out. They's going to be powder burned 'fore we get to the end of this trail."

"Can happen," Luke shrugged. The two rode on, saving their ponies as much as possible. The draw stretched ahead of them endlessly, heat-stricken, utterly barren. They covered several miles. Now they could make out the heat-blurred outlines of Sentinel Rock, where the draw widened out as it entered Good Indian Valley.

Luke looked back over his shoulder. Not more than half a mile now separated pursuers and pursued. His eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "Going to be close, pard," Doyle shouted. He was grinning, his dust rimmed eyes burned with recklessness.

Hardly were the words out of his mouth when the horse stumbled, went down. Clem was flung clear. Luke reined in, circling back. Clem was on his feet. His face was haggard but his eyes did not waver. "Ride for it, pard. My luck's run out" Luke made no answer. Leaning from the saddle, he caught Clem by the shoulder, swung him from the ground. In mid air Doyle's foot found the stirrup. A scramble and he swung himself behind his comrade.

His voice rose breathlessly. "You damn fool! You could a-made it alone. Now...!"

"Shut up!" Luke snapped. A puff of dust blossomed close behind them. A second later, came the flat crack of a rifle. Morey's jaw muscles tightened, bunching under the skin. He turned the horse, angling for the break in the face of one limestone wall. Jagged masses of black lava almost choked the entrance. If they could reach the shelter of the rock, they had a fighting chance. But could they make it before their enemies cut them off?

Weir and his men were spurring in savagely. The partners had but a scant two hundred yards to go now. And then Luke felt the horse quiver, distinctly heard the slap of the bullet as it smashed into living flesh. With a warning shout to his partner, he kicked free from the stirrups, jumped clear as the animal went down.

Luke landed on his feet. Clem had fallen to his knees, but he was up in an instant. One quick glance Luke flung over his shoulder. Their pursuers were so close he could see the gleam of Milt Weir's bared teeth. The next second he was sprinting for the rocks. Behind them the Ebony Gang opened up with a ragged volley.

Clem was struggling to arise, but it was too late. Luke lifted his arms in a token of surrender. Dust eddied up in a lazy cloud as the Ebony Gang surrounded them. Weir rode in close, murky eyes lit with a savage glow. He did not speak, but a muscle twitched at one corner of his tight set mouth. He leaned forward in the saddle. Slowly, deliberately, the muzzle of his Colt came up. Like a coiled rattler he was preparing to strike.

Morey did not flinch, his gaze held Weir's steadily. But his nerves vibrated with the first word from the unseen speaker at his back. "Grab for the sky, the lot of you. We've got you covered!"

The moment or two of silence that followed the brusk command was tense with explosive possibilities.

"YOU'RE a few minutes late to cut in on the reward, Sheriff. We claim these men as our prisoners."

"Is that a fact," Wheeler exclaimed. He smiled mirthlessly. "Happens there ain't no reward offered, Milt. There wasn't any stage robbery, either; not this last time. That was a putup job. Luke figured you'd fall for it. Now suppose you grab for your ears and do it quick!"

Watching Weir, Luke saw his pupils narrow to pinpoints, but the gambler's voice was deceivingly smooth. "Quite a trick, eh, Sheriff? Our friend Morey is smart, very smart." His lips twisted in a quick snarl. "Too bad he won't live to enjoy the reward of his virture."

With the words, Weir spurred the horse savagely. The animal reared, lunged forward. At the same moment the gambler fired pointblank at the man who had trapped him. But Luke had not been caught napping; he threw himself aside, felt the bullet tug at his coat. Then the sixgun he had snatched from the holster bucked hard against his palm.

Weir straightened convulsively. His horse was already at a dead run. For a brief space of time he stayed in the saddle, weaving with every move of the animal beneath him. Then he collapsed, swayed forward and plunged headlong to the earth.

There was no further resistance. Morey slid his gun back into its holster, turned to find Clem Doyle on his feet. His partner shook his head, grinning sheepishly. "Bullet tore the heel off my boot. Felt like it had busted up my whole leg. Luck was sidin' us both."

"Which is puttin' it mild," Wheeler put in. "You boys took a mighty long chance. I said so at the start."

Luke stroked his chin. "You showed up just in time, Bart. Didn't expect to find you down this far."

"Well, that was luck, too," Wheeler answered. "Some of the boys were for waitin' down at the Rock, like you said. But I had a hunch, so we moved on up this morning. Was less than half a mile away when we heard the first shot. The way it looks to me, we been doublin' our bets on lady luck ever since you got the idee of the fake holdup."

"Don't know as I'd make it that strong, Bart," Morey declared thoughtfully. "Strikes me we used our heads some, figuring that when you want to get a wolf out in the open, it's easier to bait him out than to go in his den and grab aholt of his tail."

"Maybe, maybe," Wheeler conceded doubtfully. "Only I don't jest hanker to act as wolf bait, myself. Speakin' o' that, you boys got a nice slice of reward money coming for this job."

"Reward money?" Luke looked at his partner, shook his head. "Wrong again, Bart. Nobody's owin' us anything. I hear they's some reward money comin' to Missus Tom Riley."

"Now that *is* a notion," the Sheriff declared heartily. "I might a-knowed it, though. I wanna say right here and now you boys are—"

"Yeah, we know," Luke cut in hastily. A twinkle appeared in his eyes, a smile threatened the gravity of his expression. "We're bait. Just wolf bait. But we brought home the bacon!"

★

ABLE CAIN'S MUTE EVIDENCE

by A. A. Baker

The whole question was: had that sidewinder Sol Adamson been cornered into turning his ill-gotten money over to Deefy Derrick?

IT WAS A fine autumn day in the Sierra town of Apex. Judge Able Cain, leaning back in his barrel chair, ran blunt thumbs up under the straps of his striped bib overalls. He scratched luxuriously through his wool shirt. A peaceful smile etched across the broad face shaded by the wide rim of his black hat. Then he yawned, stretched, and surveyed the street.

Apex was crowded; bustling with miners released from the hydraulics and tromping into the saloons in jostling good humor for the snort that would loosen the dirt from their dry throats. The storekeepers leaned against door frames and exchanged greetings with friends. Hog-sticking time, mused the judge. The corn was in, the hay stacked and pumpkins, rosey and ready for the pie plates, were stacked along the boardwalk in front of Quinn's trading store.

Soon—Able clawed his turnip watch from the overall bib and checked—the stage would round the top of the hill and clatter down the street. That would mean mail; and maybe a visitor or two. Where they'd lodge, would be another matter; the town was full. Bull Johnson's strike on the Bear River had brought prospectors in like gobs of flies. Yes, sir, smiled Able Cain inwardly, old Apex was just swelled up with folks and booming like no other California Mother Lode town. And the judge would see to it that nobody would puncture Apex's baloon. Not anybody!

The stage, chains gangling, its yellow box swaying like a schooner on a rolling sea, pounded down the main street. Able opened a sleepy eye and watched it unload. His other eye popped open in a squint at the corpulent figure of Sol MacAdamson.

Sol, leaving the stage door open, had planted his spit and spang boots on the boardwalk; then turning to ease the dog chain handcuffed to his wrist, dragged the heavy green carpet bag from the interior of the stage. The bag was heavy and Sol grunted. He let the carpet bag drop and looked around for a porter.

"Damnation!" groaned the watchful judge, his sense of peace evaporating. This Sol MacAdamson was a gold buyer; a stock operator and, rumor had it, a claim jumper—a leech of the Mother Lode, who fattened on the golden blood stream of the Sierras. And now—Able spat into the dusty street—MacAdamson had arrived right here in Apex with a carpet bag heavy with gold coin—Judas gold.

"You can get right back onto that stage!" The judge was shouting and heaving his heavy bulk off the porch, his hobnailed miner's boots splashed the red dust as he hurried across to the stage.

"You're Judge Able Cain?" Sol's greeting was coldly affable. "I've

looked forward to making your acquaintance, sir . . ."

"You've made it," growled the judge. "Now get back into that stage and don't leave it till you're out of my jurisdiction."

"And my rights?" began Sol, his oily face yellowed, as though stained by the minted coin in the carpet bag; the black hair of his wrist curling over the locked clamp, his legs stradling the carpet bag.

"You've got none, no rights at all—here," gritted the judge. He reached out angry arms for a grip on Sol's wrist "Expecting to get—understand? Get!" Able's face reddened as he tried to hoist the unwilling visitor back into the stage box.

"Let Loose!" MacAdamson snapped, peering around the gathering crowd. "Has this man gone crazy?" he appealed, and watched the grins widen as a miner shouted.

"Loco, his brains is addled!"

"Kills butterflys with a sledgehammer!" interrupted a jovial voice.

The first miner got back in. "He's a local problem. The kinda case other towns don't say nothin' about; keeps 'em locked up in a dark garret. The judge don't exactly squeeze you to death, but he comes close. Just hold your breath till he spits in your eye, then his fit's over and he'll go away."

SOL MACADAMSON panicked. He worked a desperate hand into his cumberbund to bring forth a double shot Derringer; and fired. The crowd drew back, expecting Able to fall, but the big judge wrestled himself around to the gold buyer's side and the slug burned its scorching way across the bib of the striped overalls and sang on across the street.

Able pulled his stubbled cheek close to Sol's neck; then, hunching his powerful frame, he bent. Blood worked up under Sol's face, his eyes popped and he flailed weakly with the sleeve gun. His breath, which he fought to hold in strangling lungs, broke from his puffed cheeks and Sol MacAdamson collapsed.

Able Cain stepped back, holding his opponent's slack frame. "Think it's funny?" he gritted. "This critter can mess up a town faster'n a sidewinder can strike."

He kicked the carpet bag. "That's his venom. A sidewinder can only make one strike—expel the poison just once into its victim, but this kind of rattlesnake goes back for more venom. Keeps right on biting. Now," he turned, "help me chuck him back onto this vehicle."

"One moment, Senor Judge." Reek Chillhowa, a squat Spainard, waddled forward holding up a square fingered hand; the palm olive against the crusty brown of his ornamented Mexican jacket.

"One moment, hell!" Answered Judge Cain. "He's leaving Apex, Reek; understand?"

"That may be so," answered Reek. "If you give the order, as you are the Alcade, he shall leave Apex. But *I* shall give him lodging at my Casa which, you understand, senor Judge, is outside of the limits of your city."

Reek Chillhowa snapped a command over his shoulder. "Hermanas! Quickly, bring a horse. Be gentle with Senor MacAdamson and his bag of gold." The Spainard grinned coldly then hunching

a beefy shoulder under the judge's victim, took his full weight away from Able and walked the still gasping MacAdamson through the crowd, followed by Hermanas with the heavy bag.

Able Cain watched the trio leave. He ran a reflective finger through the powder-stained hole in his overalls and spat against the nearest hitch post. Then, with a shrug of frustrated disgust, recrossed the street to the hotel porch and settled back in his chair.

"I SEEN THAT, Judge." Pike Peel, Apex's deputy, moved his pipestem legs through the ten foot doors of the hotel and let his skinny shadow fall across the judge's perplexed face. "Dumbest thing ..."

"Yes," interrupted the judge. "But I was daydreaming here, thinking about how everything was so nice in Apex. No killings for over thirty days; no lynching since way last spring..."

"Auburn's had three," grunted Pike; "an' four more on the American River."

"Then," blurted the judge, "I saw Sol climb out of that stagecoach and I guess I blew my top. He's castor oil in a wedding cake!"

"Reek Chillhowa'll take care of him," answered Pike with a faint grin. "He'll get Sol up there, in that castle he calls his Casa, with them cutthroats he used out in Nevada ..." Pike drew a boney finger across his throat. "An' they'll give Sol a bucket to catch his own blood."

"Nobody can prove," objected the judge, "that Chillhowa is really Nickamor Rodriques. Because a man comes here and builds a fine house and has money to burn —doesn't mean he's the Nevada Bandit ..."

"Fourteen men," Pike stepped around Able and faced the judge, "Nickamor's trademark. Never less'n fourteen in the gang—never more'n fourteen. Killed an' robbed stages, raided Nevada mines; even fought off the U.S. Calvary but—always with fourteen men. How many's Chillhowa got? Fourteen men lyin' around on his sidehill Rancho! Eh?"

Pike continued with relish. "One man disappeared only a week after Chillhowa moved in. An' what'd Chillhowa do? Hired Deefy Derrick. Right off, hired a dumb critter like Deefy Derrick. Eh?"

"So Deefy brings it back to fourteen?" agreed Judge Cain. "Now he's got Sol MacAdamson."

"Sol makes it fifteen!" Snapped Pike Peel. "An' I'll lay you odds, a turnip against a barrel of whiskey, that Chillhowa'll be back to his original fourteen! And Nickamor Rodriques—or Reek Chillhowa—whichever you want to call him, will have Sol's carpet bag full of coin."

"Fairy tales!" Shouted the judge. "Nickamore went to Mexico!"

"An' Captain Love killed Joaquin Murrietta—*they say!* Pickled his head in a jar of whiskey," snickered Pike Peel. " 'Cept Chinaboys is still bein' found with their throats slashed, an' river miners is still being lasooed an' their ears cut off! Don't," snorted Pike, "tell *me* they can tell which Mexican is which. That's Nickamor Rodriques—*and you'll see!*"

The judge was weary of the argument. What difference did it make? Sol had swindled enough honest miners, had—it was whispered—even poisoned a pair of Illinois brothers on the Yuba. If Sol was in the hands of a murdering bandit, the varmit could take care of himself; and maybe even come out a bit ahead. Anyway, Sol MacAdamson wasn't messing up Apex. Able Cain pulled down his hat brim and vainly tried to reconjure up the mental vista of a peacefully productive autumn. But the black eyes; the pockmarked face of Reek Chillhowa, floated against the sodden background. And Able's mental eye saw Sol MacAdamson a corpse—his dog chain still fastened to his wrist, but the carpet bag empty—

wedged among the debris of some river bend.

The judge stirred. His conscience was running hot needles through his brain, and bringing a dyseptic burning to his stomach. If, by forcing Sol MacAdamson to accept the dangerous hospitality of a suspected bandit, a judge had brought Sol into danger of losing his life—then said judge was remiss in his obligations. And Pike's comparison made sense. *Reek Chillhowa could be Nickamor Rodriques.*

"Pike!" Able's shout caught the retreating deputy in the middle of the street and Pike calipered back quickly to the porch.

"Now you've got a convincing argument," Able began, "and I guess I have to take some action; else Sol MacAdamson's death could haunt me."

"So...?" Pike hunched the holstered colt higher on his boney hip.

"You get on into Carson City, Nevada. You find somebody there who has seen Rodriques, then you bring that witness back here to Apex. Got it, Pike?"

"Sure, Judge. But it'll take time; maybe three days..."

"Three days, or three months!" ranted the judge. "Get at it. I'll get up to Rodriques' Casa in the morning and get MacAdamson out of there."

Pike Peel clumped off the porch toward the livery stable. Able Cain slumped in his chair, beginning to relax. Now, come morning, everything would be straightened out.

THE MOON, a glowing silver dollar in the Sierra sky, had beaten its night long path across the starry sky; prying with drowsy fingers. Then the sun at the shuttered windows of the judge's room, brought him out of a nightmareish sleep. He had spent the long night dreaming that he was hacking at the lid of a golden coffin. He had pried and chopped with rubber tools, tools that bent and floundered against the coffin lid. He knew Sol MacAdamson was inside the coffin and his frustrated urgency to pry off the lid, made the big judge roll and toss—made him wake up and then slip back into uneasy sleep. The long night had been torturous, and Able was relieved to see the dawn. Now he would get up there to Chillhowa's Casa and get the gold buyer away.

Grimly, the judge rose. He hung his tasseled night cap on the bed post and pulled his long wool socks over the ankles, tucking in the red drawers. He jammed heavy legs into a clean pair of striped overalls; he belted on his Colt, then donned his badge of office—the greenish frock coat and the dented black top hat. The judge rubbed a hand over his stubbled face, glared into the sliver of mirror on the marble topped wash stand and shook his head. No time to shave. Best get along up to Nickamor's. No, damn it, to *Chillhowa's* Casa!

The Casa was a massive structure. The judge left his buggy outside of the enclosure. Field rock and mountain granite had been hewed, mortared and stacked into a square wall; entered by a gate of huge oak logs and held firm by forged iron braces.

Behind the wall was a two-story building—the porch racing entirely around the second story—with narrow windows that reminded Able of rifle ports. Behind the main building a smaller structure—like a carriage house perched on thin legs, reached by a steep stairway—was what the judge thought might be a carriage house or groom's quarters. This was near the stable and chicken houses. Close by, enjoying the shade and aroma of the manure stack, was a hog pen. The areaway passing the main building, was filled with rose bushes, their stark green leaves constrasted sharply with the white river rock of the driveway.

The judge paused at the front door, raising his knuckles to knock, then

drew back, listening. A low moan, spaced by guttural sobs, leaped from the carriage house. Able stepped around the corner, shouldered his way down the narrow paths of the rose garden and halted at the foot of the stairway. The Casa was silent and seemed deserted.

He glanced into the barn, empty of animals. Chickens scratched silently in the heavy dung of the barn floor. The pigs, d o z i n g in the morning sun, breathed heavily and watched their beady, evil little eyes holding him in a cold stare.

THE JUDGE began the ascent. A step creaked stridently and a scream broke from behind the door. Able shuddered and drew his colt. He glanced nervously over his shoulder then, with determined haste, reached the top step. He raised his gun-butt and rapped authoratively on the panel. "Open up!" He shouted. "What's the fuss about?"

"Who's that?" It was a cracked whisper, the mumbled words of a man with his face pressed tightly against the inside panels.

"The Judge," answered Able; "this is the judge out here. Is that you, MacAdamson?"

"Yes..." The words were stronger, ready to break into sobbing. "Are you sure you're the judge?"

"Damn it! Course I'm sure; come out of there."

The noise of a heavy dresser being pushed aside, reached Able. Slowly the door edged open a few inches. An eye, its pupils seeming as large as an olive pit, stared out of the crack; it circled around and glared past the Judge like the beam of a hooded lantern seeking the corners of a dark room.

"Thank heaven! Thank heaven, it's you." Sol MacAdamson flung open the door and brushed past the startled judge. "Come on..." Sol had stumbled down the stairway and was beckoning, his whole body in a fit of shaking. "Come on, Judge, hurry! We've got to get out."

"Hold on." Able Cain, his Colt gripped tightly, edged into the room; it was a shambles. The bed, a heavy iron affair, had evidently been braced against the door. The washstand, marble top broken, lay on its side. Only the table was upright and, gleaming faintly in the daylight, was a lighted lamp. Across the floor, Able peered carefully, was a staggered trail of blood. Drippings obscenely reflecting the light from the lamp. It was a chilling sight and Able drew a long breath of relief as he stepped outside and drew the door closed.

He looked around. Sol McAdamson had fled; even as he looked up, the gold buyer was disappearing through the wall gates. A man in a jolting run, his legs propelled by fear.

Cautiously, with that tugging reluctance that make a man turn to watch over his shoulder, Able strode back toward the main building. He stepped gingerly across the flatstones of the walkway to the front door and hammered the gun butt against its solid panels. He waited. Whatever was going on here—or had gone on—Able was going to discover. Obviously possessed by fear, Sol MacAdamson had barricaded himself in the carriage house. The judge grunted, thinking back. Had Sol left without his carpet bag? Yes. Sol had even shed the dog chain from his wrist; did that mean he had given up the coin?

With an irate boot, Able kicked at the door. It sprang open with a crash and Able found himself face to face with Deefy Derrick. The man was drunk, staggering, hoary-eyed drunk. Deefy waved a bottle of tequila, hoisted the neck to his saliva cracked lips, he gulped a gurgling drink then, smiling childishly, proffered the bottle to the judge.

The judge groaned inwardly. What a contrast. Outside, racing away in pan-

ic, was Sol MacAdamson. Here, at home in the plush living room of this huge house, was Derrick—happily drunk.

Able reached out and pressed the tall, gangling man aside. Derrick's knees buckled and he staggered backward, like a bag of disjointed bones, as though some hidden strings from behind a curtain had snapped and let the puppet sag.

THE JUDGE searched through the rooms of the upper story. Evidence of a hasty departure were everywhere. He returned to the large room, poked through a deserted kitchen; then, crossing to the now snoring Derrick, Able paused. In the dull shadow of a dining table, sagging now like a broken water bag, was MacAdamson's empty green carpet bag. A knife had been inserted along the brass bound rim and seared a clean cut the length of the bag. The dog chain and wrist manacle were unlocked. The judge stared. The metal cuff being unlocked gave him a curious feeling. Sol would never have willingly unlocked that cuff! What had happened here? Where was Reek Chillhowa, and where were his thirteen retainers? Whose blood was dripped on the carriage house floor? And Deefy Derrick, seeming in complete possession of this magnificent Casa. Had Derrick somehow driven off the Spainards?

Bending over the drunken man, Able searched the pockets of the blue jeans. A knife, deerskin handled and with a nine inch blade, a sack of tobacco and a block of Chinese matches, some coins and a piece of writing paper folded evenly...Clean, fresh paper. The judge opened the paper and stepped to the doorway.

In a flowing script, it read simply: *'To whom it may concern. This is to make it known to all men that I, Solomen MacAdamson, do release, for services rendered by one Mister George Derrick, to said Derrick, the sum of fifteen thousand dollars. The above sum being in my possession in a green carpet bag.'*

It was signed, *Solomen MacAdamson.*

Judge Cain whistled through his teeth and glared down on Deefy Derrick with new respect.

"Come on, Son." Able hoisted Derrick to his feet and hooking a forearm through the man's legs, heaved the sodden form onto his shoulders. Derrick was heavy and Able grunted through set teeth as he carried the burden to his buggy. "We'll get you downtown; and, between you and MacAdamson, maybe make some sense out of this mystery."

In front of the hotel, Sol MacAdamson had gathered a crowd of sardonic listeners. The gold buyer's keening was cut off by Able's arrival with the buggy load of drunken Derrick. Sol pointed a shaking finger and shouted. "That's him! The murderer...!"

Derrick turned, scrunching himself into a more comfortable position by draping his feet over the buggy box. He smiled in his sleep.

Dismounted and curling the reins over the whipstock, the judge dropped his halter iron weight, snapped a clamp on the horse's bit ring and turned.

"Start at the beginning, Sol, and tell us: Where's the Chillhowa clan? How come the Casa is deserted? And," the judge fished the paper from his bib pocket, "tell us how come you gave your coin and this paper to Derrick?"

"You ask *him!*" Raved Sol. "Ask him what he done. Killed a man. Maybe more than one, even. Then threatened me. And I gave him my coin and that paper to save my life..."

"Derrick's dead drunk," answered Able. "So you start at the beginning, like I said. Now when Chillowa lugged you up to his Casa yesterday afternoon —what came off?"

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"Derrick's dead drunk," answered Able. "So you start at the beginning, like I said. Now when Chillowa lugged you up to his Casa yesterday afternoon —what came off?"

"We had dinner," Sol was calming. "Then I was given the carriage house room. Mr. Chillhowa showed me every

courtesy. He ordered Hermanas to give up his room. Hermanas grumbled but slept out in the hayloft. I slept until just before dawn, then I was waked by footsteps on those creaky stairs. Derrick entered my room, he was carrying a lamp and a long-bladed knife . . ."

"This one?" Able drew the horn handled weapon from his pocket.

"That's it!" shouted Sol.

ABLE RAN a fingernail along the blade, loosening flecks of dried blood. "Was it a bloody knife?"

"Not the first time," said Sol. "He just held the lamp and the knife. Standing there, looking down. Then he punched me with the handle—I think."

"What'd you mean, you think?" asked Able.

"When I first heard the stairs creak," Sol admitted sheepishly, "I covered up my head with a blanket, but I could see the light and knew it was Derrick in that room. He jabbed me a couple of times and I rolled over. He set the lamp on the table and went out of the room."

"What'd you do then, Sol?"

"I rolled over and went to sleep," admitted Sol. "I'm not used to Tequila, and I thought I was dreaming until, about a half hour later, when Derrick came back into the room. *This* time, his knife was bloody, and he stood over me a long time. I knew he'd killed someone else and was going to kill me. I begged for my life and he just stood —glaring at me. Then I understood. He kept staring at my carpet bag. So I wrote out that paper . . . And don't say it's legal! There were no witnesses, Judge. No witnesses . . ."

"You wrote out this paper?" The judge prodded.

"Yes. And after Derrick studied the paper, he grinned and made me unlock my cuff and he carried my bag out. I locked the door and jambed the furniture against it. I stayed there until you arrived, Judge."

Able Cain was staring into the east. The sun blurred two figures of approaching horsemen. One was Deputy Pike Peel, a stick-like shadow of a thin man on a fat horse. Pike, rifle cradled with its muzzle pointed into his prisoner's back, urged the animals into a trot; pulling up to edge his mount through the crowd.

"That's Herman's!" Sol MacAdamson snapped.

"It is," agreed Pike. "Like you ordered, Judge." The deputy addressed Able. "I brung someone what knows Nickamor Rodriques. Catched him up on the mountain, never had to go clear to Carson."

"You, Hermanas." The judge was blunt. "What went on at the Casa, last night?"

"Senor," Hermanas began. He had a wart, bristling with stubby hair on his jaw and Able found himself watching the muscles flex the wart as he talked. "There, at the Casa, we have much excitement. This one," he pointed to Sol, "gave to Derrick, the gold he carried in the carpet bag. Reek Chillhowa," Hermanas smirked as he used the name, "sold the Casa, Senor. To Derrick. Understand, Judge?"

"Why?" blurted Able.

"Cause Reek Chillhowa says he is long overdue in Mexico. He longs for the heat of the desert, for the true tequila, for the plump Mexican ladies. So . . ." Hermanas spread his hands. "So Derrick gave him fifteen thousand dollars, American. Reek gives the Casa. He writes a paper. All legal . . ."

Sol MacAdamson groaned. "But the money wasn't legally . . ."

"Hush!" snapped the judge and directed Pike to search the pockets of the drunken Deefy Derrick. Tucked in a tobacco pouch was another receipt. The judge read it aloud.

"The Casa Chillhowa, in consideration of a payment of fifteen thousand dollars, is sold to Senor George Derrick." The paper was dated and Able started as he glared at the signature. Boldly, it sprawled across the full width

of the document. *Nickamor Rodriques.*

A RIBALD laugh from the crowd broke through the judge's bewilderment. He jutted his head forward until Hermanas drew backward in dismay.

"Sol MacAdamson claims," Able gritted, "that Derrick killed someone and entered his room with a bloody knife. Sol signed the coin over to Derrick for fear of his life. If he was forced to sign away his coin, Derrick did not have the legal right to take that money. If so, he had no right to give Nickamor Rodriques's the fifteen thousand. Derrick was a member of Rodriques's gang..."

"Not so," Hermanas blandly replied. "Senor Derrick takes care of the hogs—only. And I, Hermanas, direct Derrick. I tell him when to kill a pig—when to fatten a pig. He is what you call a hog-sticker."

The wart on the Spaniard's jaw jumped as he suddenly exclaimed. "Aha! I see what happen. This could be. Derrick comes to my room before dawn, because the night before I give him orders to butcher a pig..."

"That was last night?" prompted the judge.

"Yes, Judge. So Derrick, he comes before the dawn. He thinks *I* am asleep; he does not know that Senor MacAdamson is sleeping in my bed..."

He frowned darkly. "He thinks that I am sleeping in the hayloft. Derrick finds a man with his head covered. He punches him with the knife. The man does not awaken, so Derrick leaves and kills a pig. Job done, he returns and the knife is now bloody, no? He returns, as always, to show that he has killed the pig as I order. MacAdamson is filled with fear, he gives up his gold to save his life—he thinks. Derrick is pleased and, with the gold, wakes Nickamor. He buys the Casa. Is so?"

"But," Able Cain groaned in mock desperation, "everyone knows Deefy is deaf and dumb."

Able halted and looked into the startled eyes of Sol MacAdamson, then finished with a hoot of laughter. "Everyone knows, but Sol MacAdamson! Sol thinks Derrick killed someone with the bloody knife when all he's done is kill a pig and returned to report the task is finished! Sol signs over his money. Gives it—to Derrick!"

Judge Able Cain waited for the hoots of the delighted crowd of Apex citizens to calm down. Sol MacAdamson, his face fallen with shock, shrank within himself and waited for the solemn pronouncement of the judge.

"Thus—all facts gathered and examined," the sonorous voice poured out. "I pronounce that George Derrick came by this money without force or coercion. He purchased the Casa Rodriques legally, and has a duly signed bill of sale, signed by one Nickamor Rodriques. Further, I pronounce that one Sol MacAdamson, being without funds, is considered a vagrant on the unsullied streets of Apex and that he shall remove himself forthwith immediately, or suffer the consequences of a canter on a greased pole."

Able turned to Sol and spat, "Get!" Sol turned and trudged through the crowd and plodded up the road.

"What about Hermanas?" began Pike. "He's a member of Nickamor's gang, ain't he?"

"I'll ponder that," grinned the judge. "In the meantime, let him join Nickamor Rodriques in Mexico—if I want him, I'll send for him!"

"What about Deefy Derrick?" asked Pike.

"As owner of the Casa Rodriques—and being an influential member of this community—I'll permit him to sleep off his drunk in my buggy."

The judge strode over to the hotel porch and settled down into his padded barrel chair.

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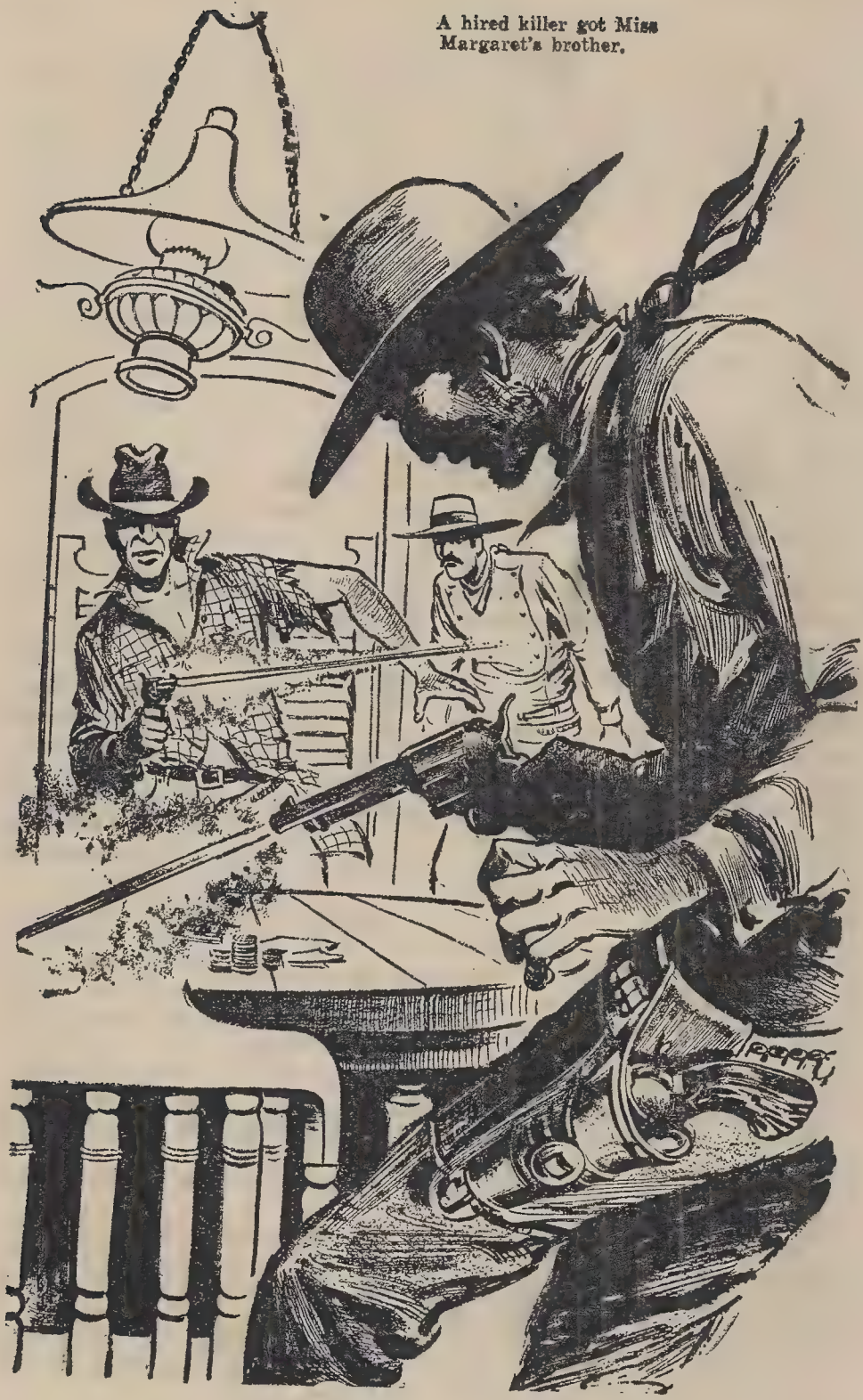

A hired killer got Miss Margaret's brother.

THE GUNSMOKE CYCLE

by Jim Brewer

Wid Schaefer had chucked his hardware to conform with the rules when he went to work for Miss Margaret. So the toughs who came to scare off Miss Margaret's hands made a natural mistake . . .

MOST OF the crew had been watching from the door and windows of the bunkhouse, but now as the gunman approached they were attempting to busy themselves. The gunman's employer was on the gallery of the house talking with Miss Margaret. The silence was unnatural as the gunman stepped into the big room and grinned at the faces that turned to greet him.

He was a man of medium height with quick, thin limbs and cold, slate-colored eyes. He stopped inside the door, leaned against the jamb and grinned humorlessly at his audience.

The silence held as the eight punchers in the bunkhouse were as still as death itself, awaiting the gunman's words. The gunman must have relished the silence as a tribute to his stature for it was a long time before he spoke. Then he said, in a voice reminiscent of a child bully, "Boss wants you boys to quit your jobs."

The silence was his only answer. He waited a moment for the edict to sink in, then challenged in a louder tone: "Hear?"

As the silence continued, he grinned contemptuously. Then he caressed the handle of his low-hung sixgun suggestively. "I'll be back tomorrow evening," he said. "Anybody that ain't left by then, ain't never going to leave!"

He swept the assembly with another contemptuous look then turned insolently and went back out the door.

For a time no one moved. Then one tall puncher stepped to a window and stood watching from a corner. His words kept the others informed of the events taking place outside. "Kyle Dawson was bidding Miss Margaret goodnight; now he and the gunman were mounting up. Then they were riding away."

Wid Schaefer lay on his bunk with his hands fastened behind his head, staring at the ceiling as he had since supper. He had remained aloof from the excitement of the others occasioned by the arrival of the rancher, Dawson, and his gunman. And now he listened as his bunkmates congregated in the center of the room and discussed the gunman's ultimatum.

"No little runt like that is going to scare me off!" the tall puncher who had watched from the window declared. "This job is the best one I ever had and I'm going to keep it!"

The others seemed to be in agreement, and as they turned in each one hoped to get the chance to settle the gunman's hash.

NEXT MORNING at breakfast they were still in accord, but were not so outspoken. And after the meal, Wid watched them come out of the bunkhouse one at a time with their warbags packed. Individually they went to the house to draw their time and singly they left the ranch and headed in different directions.

When they were all gone, Wid moved to the corral and built himself a cigaret. He was smoking it thoughtfully and gazing into the distance of the prairie when he heard the door of the house close. And several moments later, Miss Margaret was standing beside him. "I've got your money ready."

Wid turned his head to regard her. She was a tall girl with brown hair and blue eyes. Her figure was well proportioned and her expression reflected the good humor of her being. But the responsibility of running the ranch the three years since her father was killed by an outlaw stallion made her manner grave.

"I don't remember asking for it," Wid said.

She started and studied him for a few moments, as though she had never really seen him before. Then she said, "I appreciate your intentions, Wid, and I thank you. But I realize what has happened, and I can't let you sacrifice your life needlessly."

Wid remembered what the first rancher he'd seen in this valley had said when he asked him for a job. "Margaret Palmer is hiring. Better get rid of that gun though; she won't have anyone who might be a gunslinger on her place."

Wid had glanced at his tied-down gun and then regarded the rancher with his level gaze. "Why?"

"Her brother was a gunhawk," the rancher had said, "and he left the valley to follow his profession. It hurt the old man and the boy's sister. Then they heard he'd been killed in a range war in Texas; and after the old man passed on, Miss Margaret wouldn't have anything to do with a man who might be one of the breed."

Wid remembered that he'd considered not coming here, but he was down to his last dollar. He'd stuffed his gun and rig into his warbag and Miss Margaret had hired him, although she had been dubious after seeing the worn spot on his levis made by the holster.

Now Wid shrugged. "What makes you think I'll be sacrificing my life?" he asked, as though the idea were ridiculous.

"That little gunman of Dawson's is a killer," she said. "I have an idea of what he told you boys last night and I know he'll carry out his threat."

Wid thought of Dawson and scowled. Dawson owned the neighboring Bar D ranch, and was said to be totally unscrupulous and very ambitious. The Bar D had already swallowed several adjoining ranches and now Dawson had his eye on the Palmer spread. To this end, he had begun to court Miss Margaret; but the girl had spurned him. He was making his move now to force her to marry him by scaring away her employees. Unable to operate the ranch, she would be forced to accept his proposal or sell out; and Wid knew what she would get for the ranch if she sold it.

Wid laughed lightly. "You're imagining things. The gunman came in to borrow makings while his boss was talking to you."

The girl regarded him for a moment then turned her gaze. Wid knew she had too much respect for a man's dignity to say anything more on the subject. Presently she said, "I'll make the chuck tonight," then walked back toward the ranchhouse.

Wid watched her go, a mixture of thoughts confusing his mind. He hadn't intended to stay here this long; he'd only wanted a stake, then he was going to move on. But something about Miss Margaret had held him here.

It might have been her pleasant manner, or the way she treated the men,

or just the way she looked. Wid knew that he had become infatuated with her and yet he hesitated to admit it to himself. He told himself he wanted to get a little bigger stake, or a little more rest where he wasn't known...

BUT HE STAYED on another week, then another, and soon a month had passed. Still he made no effort to move on. He watched as Dawson courted the girl, cursing to himself because Miss Margaret was too good for the rancher. He knew that she wasn't for the likes of him either, and yet he couldn't bring himself to drift onward...

He killed the day doing odd chores around the ranch buildings. He took the evening meal with Miss Margaret in the house, doing his awkward best to mind his manners and keep up his end of the conversation. Afterward he went to the barn and stood in the doorway, building a cigaret and then smoking it.

Dawson and the gunman came riding out of the setting sun. They reined up before the house, and the gunman let his sneering glance rest on Wid. The rancher said something to the gunman and Wid ground the cigaret under his heel and headed slowly for the bunkhouse.

In the empty building, he dug the gun rig out of his warbag and strapped it on. He drew the weapon several times for practice, then went back outdoors.

Dawson and the gunman had dismounted and hitched their horses. The gunman had started toward the bunkhouse, but he paused as he saw Wid and laughed mirthlessly. "Look at this, boss," he said, and pointed at the gun strapped to Wid's waist.

Dawson stepped out from behind the horses and studied Wid. He was a man in his middle thirties with good features marred by the ruthlessness of his expression. He didn't share the gunman's mirth; he simply said, "Take him!"

The gunman crouched a little, preparatory to make his draw. "Go ahead!" he taunted Wid; "make your move!"

Without changing his position, Wid said, "I'm giving you both a chance to get away from here and stay away!"

The gunman laughed, as though it were all a great joke; yet through it all his eyes never left Wid. Dawson kept his gaze on Wid, his expression becoming more thoughtful.

Wid waited fully a minute. Dawson and the gunman made no move to obey his edict—as he had known they would. Then he assumed a crouch similar to that of the gunman; and in that moment, the gunman realized for the first time that he was up against someone of his own calibre. His lips formed a silent curse and he drew.

WITH THE gunman's first move, Wid went for his gun. He bested the gunman's draw by a slim fraction of a second. His sixgun roared and the gunman was driven backward, his weapon discharging harmlessly into the ground.

Wid swept his glance to Dawson and saw that the rancher was making a play. As Dawson's gun cleared leather he triggered. Dawson spun in a complete circle, then fell face forward to the ground.

Wid waited a moment then holstered his sixgun. Both Dawson and the gunman lay still in death. The door of the house opened and Miss Margaret stood on the gallery her eyes wide in shock at what she saw.

Wid went into the bunkhouse. He'd packed his warbag that afternoon and he tossed it over his shoulder and walked to the corral. He dabbed a loop on his claybank and proceeded to saddle the mustang.

It was always like this since he'd taken up the gunfighting profession. He couldn't stay in one place long, he had to move on. And he had known he

would have to move on before he even came here.

But he'd come and seen Miss Margaret. A man is never without hope, even though he knows the emotion is useless. But he had allowed himself that luxury...

He finished saddling and swung atop the claybank. He started to turn the horse's head when he saw Miss Margaret watching him from the corner of the harness shed.

"Wid," she said, "don't go! You've done me a great service tonight. Maybe I've been wrong about gunmen."

He studied her a moment, the hope struggling to assert itself; but he knew that it was useless. He shook his head. "No, Miss Margaret, you weren't wrong."

He looked at her another long moment then touched spurs to the claybank. The animal moved out of the yard and he urged it to a gallop. Far out on the prairie he slowed the mount to a walk and wondered. He wondered whether he should have told her that he was the gunman who had killed her brother.

★

Roaring Bullwhips

Special Feature by LEE THOMAS

SLOWLY THE lumbering oxen plodded across the Plains. Behind them, hooked in tandem, were three huge Studebaker wagons, groaning against the terrible heat and the stifling dust that arose from under their wide wheels. A big blowfly kept bothering one of the lead oxen and the driver had his eye on it. Finally the insect lighted on the ox's ear.

"Watch me kill thet fly," the driver told the brakeman, "an' what is more—I'll take nary a drop of blood out of that bull's ear, either."

The two men were plodding beside the nigh wheeler, and the fly had landed on the ear of an ox in the fourth yoke ahead. The brakeman measured the distance with his practiced eye. "Don't think you can do it, Nels."

"Wanna bet?"

"You do it—an' pull no blood—an' the drinks in Fort Union is on me."

"You're stuck for the drinks," the driver said confidently. He uncoiled his long bullwhip, let it trail out behind him—a sinous and deadly length of braided leather. Then the whip shot out, twisting and singing its lethal song. The lash made a popping sound, and then the whip trailed back—limp and long.

And the blowfly had disappeared.

"By golly," the brakeman said, "You did it, Nels. Thet fly never knowed what smashed him into Kingdom Come; an' I don't see no blood on thet critter's ear, either. So you get a free drink."

The driver coiled his whip. "Nothin' to it," he said. "That is, if you've handled a bullwhip as long as Nels Jorgenson has."

Many of the bull-drivers became experts with their long blacksnake lashes. The crack of their whips echoed along the Santa Fe Trail, the Bridger Trail, and the Oregon Trail. They prided themselves on being the toughest men on a Frontier which, at that time, was populated by tough men. Usually a bullwhip was about twelve feet long, although some were only ten; others, those handled by the most proficient skinners, sometimes measured fifteen feet. The handles were about two feet

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PAID IN FULL

by

Buck Gilmore

The man Cliff sought would be coming this way . . .

Cliff Helm suddenly found out that a seeming robbery isn't always what it seems.

CLIFF HELM barely paused in his dealing, but he gave the old man at the bar a good once-over. There was something about him that attracted attention. He was a straight-up-and down sort of a man, whose age showed chiefly in his grey hair and in the lines in his leathery face. His eyes were focused straight ahead as he stood at the bar in the *Hinote Saloon* in the little cow town of Pyote, Texas.

Cliff waited until he had dealt and looked at his cards before he asked casually. "Who's the important looking old gent at the bar?"

Helm and his friend, Tom Hogan, were playing poker with a couple of local men; one young and rather nervous, the older man, named Garvey, was hard-looking, an unperturbed individual. Garvey shot an identifying glance toward the bar.

"You must mean Elmer Hepler," he said with a dry smile at Cliff's description of the man. Garvey puffed reflectively on a long thin cigar, then continued, "That man is the nearest thing to a hermit that I have ever seen. He lives to himself on his place out west of here, the Tumbling T, and never talks anything but business with anybody—and that only when he has to." He paused to raise his eyebrows in Helm's direction. "Betting?"

Garvey's over-stuffed assurance didn't bother an old professional card-player like Cliff Helm. He shoved a couple of chips in and looked over at Tom Hogan.

"He's got a reputation around here for being shrewd but honest," Garvey went on, as though he had not interrupted himself.

Cliff's color rose as he heard this. Garvey eyed him curiously as he added another bit of information.

"Folks around here never had their curiosity satisfied about what he does with his money. Doesn't put it in the bank or spend it around here. Got a nice ranch but not what it could be

considering the business he does."

Garvey paused to study his cards but he kept Helm in the corner of his eyes. "Some figure he must have quite a wad of cash hidden around his place somewhere."

Soon, but not too soon, after that, Cliff Helm brought the game to an only fairly profitable conclusion. Tom Hogan pushed his chair back, got up and made his way out of the saloon beside Helm.

"Well, you sure were in a hurry to end that game," Tom said, grinning good naturedly, as they walked down the street. "What's got into you? Since you first noticed that old jigger at the bar you've been acting queer. Know him?"

FOR ANSWER, Cliff dug an old paper, worn around the folds, out of his wallet, and handed it to his friend. Tom opened it gingerly, expecting it to fall apart, and whistled at what he read.

"You mean this Hepler actually owes you twenty-five hundred dollars? See here, Cliff, when did you ever get twenty-five hundred dollars worth of beef on the hoof?"

Helm let the paper fall into folds again and returned it to his wallet. "This was a long time ago, Tom. My share of my father's estate. My dad never really approved of me. Seemed like I was always getting to some sort of a jam, or another, and he never had any sympathy for me. He was always telling me that it wasn't as though I didn't know how I was supposed to act. I guess I felt sorry for myself, for I left home. When the old man died and left me that herd it really got me." Cliff scuffed up a little pile of dust with his booted toe, then looked off toward the far horizon.

"I really fixed myself up, though," he continued. "Sold all the cattle to Elmer Hepler. But when I went around to collect I found out he'd resold them and lit out. He just seemed to drop out of existence. I searched for years, but didn't see him again until now. It's sort of a shock."

"Yeah, and now that you've found him what are you going to do?" Hogan grabbed Cliff's shoulder, his eyes glinting a little, like a man who has just found gold. "According to what old Garvey said, Hepler has plenty of money. Twenty-five hundred dollars is rightfully yours and you can prove it. Come on, I'll go help you collect!"

Cliff Helm's dark eyes searched Tom's, but without saying a word he turned and started back toward the saloon, Hogan clumping along behind him.

Cliff pushed open the saloon doors, walked slowly up to the straight-backed old man, handed a paper to him. "I'd like to collect this money now, Hepler," he said sharply.

The old man stood there as though turned to a stone and did not say a word for a full minute. He raised his jigger of whiskey and gulped it down, set the glass back on the bar and turned to go, stopping only long enough to say, "You can't expect to collect a debt like that after seven and a half years. It's a dead issue; the law won't recognize it!" And he stalked out.

Cliff Helm's eyes blazed. His face flushed and his jaws set determinedly as he started after Hepler. He felt Hogan's hand on his arm, restraining him, and he turned.

"Let go of me, Tom!" he commanded, as he pushed Hogan's arm away.

Tom let his arm fall, walked beside Cliff and tried to stop him again by blocking his way. "Don't be a damn fool, Cliff," he argued. "Better cool off some before you face the Hepler gent again. I said I'd help you collect, but take it easy. Don't get yourself all worked up."

Cliff tried to get by Tom and looked over his shoulder to see Hepler riding off stiff and straight in the saddle. Then he blazed at Hogan. "Why did

you stop me? I could have killed that old son..."

"Sure you could," Tom interrupted.

"That's what I was afraid you'd do. I don't mind helping you, as I said, but I don't aim to be a party to a murder!" He watched the anger slowly leave Helm's face.

Cliff clumped morosely out into the street. "Well, I guess that takes care of that. You heard the miser. He must have been blasted out of a hunk of rock!"

Tom watched his friend scuffing along muttering. "Sure wasn't born like an ordinary human. Something damned queer about that character. He doesn't look like a dirty money-grabbing crook."

"Look, friend," Hogan said, "why don't we sit back and watch this Hepler fellow? Maybe we can separate him from some of his money if we work it right."

Cliff shot Tom a calculating glance. "Work it right?" he mused. "Probably would take dynamite to get it out of that stiff-looking old gent."

Tom Hogan grinned. "I wouldn't say that," he argued. "We can go have a talk with him anyway."

Cliff nodded briefly, "Let's go."

THE TWO men rode out to the Hepler ranch and found it spread out in front of them; neat white buildings clustered together in the middle of the desert floor—a regular oasis in the barren desert.

"What a layout!" Cliff exclaimed as he took it all in.

They rode on and looked it over from different angles without going any closer till dark. When the sky began to look grey they rode up to the white-washed buildings. They found an old Mexican leaning up against the bunk house. Cliff hailed him.

"Howdy, hombre. Is the old man at home?"

The Mexican looked up, shook his head, but didn't speak.

"Anybody else around?" Cliff inquired.

The old man shook his head again, looked at the riders with sleepy eyes, then let his chin drop on his chest.

"This old Mex isn't going to talk," Cliff whispered, "and I think he's faking that sleepy look."

Tom nodded in agreement. We'd better stick around till Hepler gets back," he suggested.

The two dismounted and walked about to stretch their legs. They left the Mexican to his siesta and strolled aimlessly around the corner of the house. Once out of sight, they started testing doors and windows. None were open. The window that opened onto the porch seemed the likeliest, and Tom set to working on the lock with a knife blade. It didn't give easily.

"Probably rusted tight," he growled. "A nice way to ruin a perfectly good blade."

"Keep trying," Cliff urged. "I'll buy you a dozen new ones!"

A low, ominous growl was their first warning that a big dog had followed them. The two men froze. The dog waited too, muscles quivering. As Cliff moved to pick up a stick from the yard, the dog sprang at him. Tom jumped after the dog and they both landed on top of Helm and went down. Tom got hold of the dog's collar before he could get his teeth into the downed man's arm.

The dog screwed his head around to get at Tom, but by holding the collar up behind the animal's ears and keeping him at a stiff-armed distance, Tom managed to protect himself while freeing his gun of its holster. He gave the dog a smart clip on the head with the butt end of it.

The animal went limp. Cliff Helm was up then, and after brushing the back of his hand across his face, went to work on the window lock. Tom jerked the cord from a bamboo cur-

tain, hanging on the porch, and tied the dog to a pillar.

Cliff finally had the window open and he climbed through it eagerly, stopped just inside and called out: "Tom, maybe you had better check that Mexican. I don't trust his sleepy act."

YOUNG HELM turned and found himself in a stiffly furnished parlor which had an unused air about it. After a glance around, he moved cautiously into the next room. This looked more promising.

It was a small room with a desk taking up the most space. He drew down the shade and lit a wall lamp, looked the room over. There was nothing as obvious as a safe. Cliff started to go through the drawers of the desk with quick tense motions. He wasn't used to these methods of doing things. He'd never had to steal before to get what belonged to him; but when a fellow steals from you . . .

What he found was an ordinary collection of books of accounts, letters, bills and receipts. Nothing to give any clue. His mouth straightened purposefully. He just wanted to lay his hands on the money Hepler owed him and leave, but it evidently wasn't going to be easy. He didn't come into this room to snoop, but—he ran his hat to the back of his head with his thumbs and settled down to an envelope stuffed full of clippings. They might give him some inkling to what this Elmer Hepler was up to. The very first one brought forth a surprised whistle.

A small, one-column picture of a scared looking kid who didn't look like he was much good, accompanied by the story of the sentencing of one Jess Hepler to jail for ten years for a robbery. Even with that poor likeness to go by, Cliff guessed that Jess must be old Hepler's son.

Another clipping, dated two years later, told of a jail break and listed young Hepler as one of the escaped prisoners. The rest of the clippings were all cut from the personal columns of paper all over the country. They read: *"Jess, I want to see you. I understand now. Answer through this column, Dad." And, "Jess, forgive me. Perhaps it's not too late to help you. Please write. Dad."* There were other variations of the same thing.

Cliff remembered the address on one of the bills. He turned back to that and found not one but many had come from detective agencies. Looking through these, he began to be sure where the old man's money was going. He had to be a miser to have enough to pay off all these claims. Some of the agencies were honest enough to discontinue after a fair try, but the others had gone offering scraps of hope and asking for more money to cover expenses.

Helm looked up from the pile of bills and found himself staring at a picture on top of the desk that he hadn't seen before. It was the same boy that looked scared and sulky in the newspaper picture; but here he was smiling and he looked like a nice, average sort of a kid.

Cliff sat staring at the picture, letting himself get used to this whole discovery when a harsh voice, crumbling under the impact of emotion, came to him from the doorway.

"So you had to come around and snoop! What did you think you'd find —buried treasure?"

HELM JUMPED up and whirled to face Elmer Hepler, who stood behind a quivering gun, his face purple with rage. Cliff raised his arms without being told to. He felt guiltier now than he had when he climbed in through the window. His voice seemed to choke its way out. "Nobody knew, Hepler."

"Well, you know now," the old man stated bitterly. He stood there, look-

ing at Cliff without saying anything more. In this silence, he seemed to be struggling for control of himself. He was quite different from the severe, chisel-faced man Helm had encountered at the bar in town.

In this charged and uncomfortable silence, Tom Hogan was ushered into the room by the old Mexican, a .45 pistol aimed at his back. The Mexican gestured with his gun and Tom took his place beside Cliff, avoiding his eyes and looking at the picture on the desk.

He looked up, puzzlement in his eyes, and inquired of Hepler, "Who's that?" nodding toward the picture.

Hepler started forward, opened his mouth to speak, when Cliff Helm answered Tom. "It's his son."

Hepler gave Cliff an angry, "Shut up, you!"

Tom Hogan looked blank with surprise. "Sorry," he said lightly. "I just thought it was someone I knew."

Hepler strode up to him, lowered his gun. "Where did you see him, fellow? Tell me!"

Tom looked more bewildered than ever. He swallowed a couple of times and said, "Well, it's probably not the same kid. It's been years..."

"Tell me!" Hepler thundered.

"Well, I don't know who he was," Tom began. "He told me his name was Johnny Dixon. We threw in together. One night we were having a game of poker and a hard loser drew a gun on us. He was going for me but Johnny went for him. He got shot clean through the middle, trying to save my life."

The old man stared hard at Tom for a long moment, then sank slowly down into the chair near the desk and his gun clattered to the floor.

Tom Hogan and Cliff Helm lowered their heads and Tom continued. "Folks around there had a real liking for Johnny. He seemed to have something bothering him he never told anybody about. We all got together and gave him a real good funeral. It was the only thing we could do for him. I owed him more than I could ever repay." Hogan looked at the picture again. "I'd never forget him, Hepler; I am sure it was your boy."

It seemed as though whatever had been holding the old man so straight melted out of him just then. He looked old and even feeble as he huddled on the chair.

Tom went over to him and touched him on the shoulder. "We're sorry, Hepler." He told him gently.

The old man sat there staring at the floor. His voice came low and a little blurred. "At least I know now. Never had a chance to square myself with him. He was mixed up in a robbery and I pushed him out when he needed help. He was not a bad kid—just a little wild..."

The two intruders stood awkwardly, not looking at each other.

Hepler finally looked at Cliff Helm. "Did you wrong, too," he admitted ruefully. "Not on purpose, though. I heard Jess was here and forgot all about you; he wasn't of course. I never did find him, for he'd changed his name. Never knew what it was till now. I was desperate and would have used anyone's money, I reckon."

Cliff juggled his hat between his hands. "The way I look at it," he said, "that money would have gone a long time ago anyway. I never could get any good out of the stuff. Forget it, Hepler; you don't owe me anything." He started toward the door. "Come on, Tom, let's go."

The two men went outside, jumped astride their mounts and rode away without looking back. They heard a dog howling behind them. When presently it stopped, Tom said, "Well, I guess they let that fighting dog loose."

"Yeah," Cliff answered absently, "I reckon they did."

★

There was no help for it—Peterson had to carry that sackful of cash along a bandit-ridden trail . . .

JOURNEY INTO DISASTER

by Archie Joscelyn

HIS NAME was Peterson, so he was inevitably called Pete; a man with skin sunbrowned to match his hair, a slow smile, and a voice even more slow to be used. It was an ease of manner which more than one man had found deceiving.

Riding up from the Judith, he had been two days on the trail, without sight of anyone. The coolees still held the green of summer, but the long slopes showed autumn brown, and the cottonwoods, fringing the streams, had struck gold. It was beautiful country, but new to him. For all its strangeness, there were sure signs that he was nearing his destination. The roundup had curried the hills here within the last day or so. A lone and frightened cow, skulking in the brush, was only one sign to eyes skilled at such reading.

Smoke made a distant beckon where the sky dropped down. Peace had returned here, following the gather. A score of antelope grazed, small as jackrabbits with distance. Pete halted, leaving his horse to graze with dropped reins. He crawled two hundred yards through the browning grass, reaching the top of a knoll, then more slowly onward to where buck-brush showed brown, ripening berries turned white.

It made a perfect cover, and from among it he waggled a bandana tantalizingly. Within moments, it was spotted. The pronghorns, from a quarter of a mile away, looked and milled as though prepared to bolt. But their curiousity was greater than fear, and there was nothing to actively frighten. Presently they approached, as though on stilts. He dropped one antelope with a well-placed bullet, pausing to bleed it and partially clean it. Even then, it was a load to pack back to the horse.

Peterson rode into camp, where the smoke lifted at the juncture of the Big and Little Wolves. The roundup crew were coming in from a hard day. The endless bawling of the gathered herd sounded from a cup in the valley, half a mile away, a natural corral on three sides. A trio of riders were holding the nervous and impatient cattle. The gather, Pete estimated in a calculating glance, was well over half completed.

He rode to the chuck wagon and unloaded the antelope, seeing the grudging approval in the cook's eyes at finding it dressed out.

He waited for his pursuer to catch up with him . . .

"Thought maybe you could use this," he murmured, then proceeded to picket his own horse. Finding Thorson, the roundup foreman, he reported with equal brevity.

"I'm Peterson—repping for John Clayberg, down on the Dry Fork." For a newcomer, silence is golden.

They called Thorson "Four Eyes"—just as other men called Teddy Roosevelt "Four Eyes", in another roundup, some hundreds of miles to the east. His flesh padded the saddle comfortably, yet not to a point of burdening himself or the pony. He had observed the gift of the antelope, which was already beginning to waft its tempting fragrance as thick streaks were slapped on hot pans. The meat would be a welcome change from a diet of beef.

"There's quite a gather of Lazy S cattle," Thorson remarked. The Lazy S was Clayberg's brand. "You ain't figuring on taking them back, then?"

"No. Clayberg instructed me to sell them and bring back the money."

THORSON nodded, rubbing bristly chin. "Easier than drivin' them back, after so far a drift," he conceded. "But it makes a risky ride, carryin' so much cash."

"Could be," Peterson conceded, and took his place at the end of the line, tin plate in hand. The antelope was succulent. Nothing more was said, regarding the matter, for a couple of days. By that time the others of the roundup crew had confirmed their first favorable estimate. Peterson did his work effectively, never shirking. As the lone representative of a distant outfit, he was not required by custom to do more than keep watch of the gather of Clayberg cattle, and dispose of them at the end. But no man worked harder or to better advantage as the roundup curried out the hills of the Big Wolf.

The others called him Pete in proof of acceptance. On the second day, Bart Ladue voiced a common and growing concern.

"I reckon you and Clayberg both know what you're doing, Pete," he said dubiously. "Just the same, you're askin' for trouble. Big trouble, to sell those critters and then head back through such empty country with all that money. It might not be *plumb* empty. *I* wouldn't want to be the man to do it."

"It's a job, and it has to be done," Pete replied, simply.

"Yeah." Ladue eased tired muscles, standing and stretching in the saddle, eyes fixed on a big roan steer which eyed the brush. "But you'll be carryin' near five thousand dollars. There have been robberies—and for that amount, plenty of men would cut your throat."

Pete's shoulder lifted in an easy shrug. "You're thinkin' of Trap Nelson?"

"Him mostly," Ladue conceded. "One of the men he killed, last spring, was a friend of mine. It's bad medicine to ride alone, so long a trip."

"Not much choice, that I know of," Pete sighed. "Nobody else going that way, that I know of."

"That's the trouble.... I'll be headin' for the Judith in a couple of weeks, but I guess you couldn't wait."

"Afraid not. Clayberg needs the money to pay some bills, around the tenth."

"I sure hope he gets it," Ladue grinned. "You watch out for yourself."

The roan bolted suddenly for the brush. Ladue was after him as quickly, horse and rider exploding through the tangle of brush to face a surprised and disconcerted truant and haze him back. Nothing more was said concerning the risk of Pete's return journey. The others of the roundup crew shared Ladue's concern, but he had spoken what was in their minds, and it was not a subject to harp upon.

THEY MADE the Painted Meadows, as planned, on the final day of the roundup. The hills which cupped them were vivid with color. A score of buyers waited, men who had ridden out from Great Falls, some from as far away as Butte, to gather up such stock as was for sale. It had been a good summer, and all the beef was fat.

Most of the outfits were taking their gather and heading back to their home ranches. Only a few small bunches were up for bidding, aside from the Clayberg beef—half the expected number. Competition was brisk. Peterson ended up with more than five thousand dollars to carry back to his employer.

Thorson held out his hand, the next

morning. "Luck to you, Pete," he said. "And sleep light."

"I'll aim to," Peterson agreed. A man of few words, but competent. He'd need to be, the foreman reflected, watching him head south. It was a journey he would not care to undertake.

Pete rode that day and the next, and the return was a repetition of the ride north. He saw no one. It might be that he was watched, and the possibility of a bullet from ambush was not soothing to the nerves. There was no possible way to guard against such an attack. But he'd realized the risk before undertaking the job, and the experience had been pleasant, so far. He'd made some good friends in country where he had been a stranger.

He was boiling coffee and slicing the nub end of a bacon slab when he heard the other horse, bunched hoofs plowing down a rocky slope. The rider was making no effort to go quietly, which was reassuring, but Peterson arose from his squatting position beside the fire, his hand resting not far from his gun belt.

The breath went from his lungs in a slow easing as Bart Ladue rode into sight. He grinned in frank relief at sight of Peterson.

"So you're all in one piece yet, eh? That eased my mind. I ain't been sleepin' right, thinkin' about you, Pete. It got to the point where I decided that, since I had to go, I might as well make my trip early. In case you don't mind company."

"I like company," Pete assured him. "These are long miles. Sorry about the bacon; I just sliced the last."

Ladue was hobbling his horse. He jerked his head toward his saddle. "Plenty in my saddle-bags. Dig some out."

Peterson did. The two talked far into the evening, sprawled near the fire, for the fall air was chill. They kept far enough back to afford uncertain targets to a possible marksman. Pete used his own saddle-bags for a pillow, but beyond that he took no obvious precaution.

HE WAS unsaddling the next evening when Ladue thrust the gun against his back.

"I don't like to kill a man unless I have to," Ladue explained, grinning broadly, and reached with his other hand to help himself to Peterson's gun. "Always easier and nicer to do things in a nice friendly way. But I need that cash."

Pete tensed, a big man whose hands held leashed power. But that was of no use against the slap of a bullet. His shoulders fell resignedly. "You'll be telling me next that you're Trap Nelson?"

"That's right," Ladue agreed cheerfully. "I have a lot of names, when it comes to that. Now go ahead and cook supper. Only remember who I am, and that I pack the hardware."

Pete obeyed, with no outward show of concern. He was a cool one, Ladue admitted, watching. Too cool. Such men were dangerous. Once supper was out of the way, he'd have to shoot him. Not only did Peterson know who he was, but he'd be quite capable of turning the tables, given half a chance.

None of that showed in the outlaw's face or voice as he talked and ate; outwardly they were as friendly as before, except for the gun always at hand. Ladue finished, wiping his mouth and stretching, always keeping a careful distance between the two.

"I'll take that money now, Pete," he said, almost apologetically. "Have to be riding, and make the most of the night."

"Help yourself." Pete shrugged. "You seem to be in control."

"I planned it that way; makes for less trouble." Keeping a wary eye on his companion, Ladue upended the sad-

dlebags, spilling Peterson's possibles on to the ground. There was a tintype of a girl at whom Ladue gave a second look, grinning as he glanced sideways.

"Quite a looker," he said. "I didn't think that of you, Pete."

"My sister," Pete explained.

"Makes me almost wish I was your friend," Ladue complained. He fingered through the odds and ends, frowning as he failed to find the money. It had not occurred to him that it would not be in the saddle-bags.

"Where is it?" he demanded impatiently. "Shell out." His voice roughened. "I haven't got all night."

"I guess it's up to you to find it," Peterson suggested. "Why should I want to help you?"

Crossed, Ladue's temper was brittle. He shook out Peterson's blanket, scowled blankly around the camp Peterson's horse was still saddled, since Ladue had ordered the animals left ready to travel. He swung back, the gun suddenly a thing of menace.

"I figured you'd think you were smart," he growled. "And I guess you are. But there's a limit. I don't mind killing a man when I have to. By degrees, if it works better that way. *Where's that money?"*

Peterson sighed resignedly.

"You can't blame a man for trying," he argued. "But come along, if you like."

Ladue was at his heels as Peterson moved toward his horse. He was suspicious, the look of a fox on his face. Peterson lifted a stirrup, hooking it over the saddle-horn, and reached for the cinch-buckle. "I'll have to unsaddle, since you insist," he said, and started to loosen the cinch.

IT HAPPENED fast, too much so for the surprised outlaw. The cayuse piched violently, kicking outward with both hind feet. Ladue tried, too late, to jump aside; the hoofs caught him in mid-section and flung him back, where he lay, groaning and breathless. Immediately, the cayuse calmed again, and everything was as before, except that Peterson had the gun.

"You hurt much?" he inquired solicitously. "That pony sure hates it when you tickle him at the wrong spot."

Resignedly, Ladue decided that, with his wind back, he wasn't much hurt. Had he been a few inches closer it might have been different, but the distance had been nicely gagued.

"Since you wanted to ride tonight, we may as well keep going," Pete added. "You ride ahead."

He took precautions, one of which consisted of tying Ladue's hands, with a lariat about the outlaw's waist. He had no need to explain the consequences should Ladue decide to kick his horse to a sudden run.

They reached the Lazy S buildings as the cook was yelling chuckwalla, and took their places at the table with the rest of the crew. Clayberg was an interested auditor regarding the journey. Once their hunger was satisfied, Peterson lifted down the saddle-bags—Ladue's, as the outlaw observed with widening eyes. From the bottom he took out the money and tendered it to Clayberg.

"That was damned clever," Ladue conceded. "But how did you manage—or suspect me, to do a trick like that?"

Pete scrubbed at unshaven chin, his eyes red from lack of sleep. "Not much to it," he said, and turned back his vest to display a Sheriff's badge. "I knew you were operating in that country, so I offered to rep for Clayberg. I figured with that much money at stake, you'd show up. When you did, and told me to get bacon out of your bags, I put the money in. Couldn't think of a likelier place."

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Special Feature

BAT MASTERSON

by J. J. Mathews

WILLIAM BARCLAY MASTERSON was born in 1856, and much of his early life was spent in buffalo hunting. In 1872, while hunting buffalo on the Salt Forks of the Arkansas River, he met Wyatt Earp, who became his life-long friend.

Many readers will recall the story of the Battle of Adobe Walls, in which nineteen hunters, including Masterson, stood off nearly a thousand Comanche, Cheyenne, and Kiowa warriors under the noted chief, Quanah Parker. This occurred in the Texas Panhandle, in June of 1874.

Bat became a civilian scout for General Miles after the Battle of Adobe Walls, and for a brief while was stationed at Sweetwater, Texas. At this time, he was but twenty years old. While there he had his fight with a rugged sergeant named King. King had a tough army reputation, as well as having been known to have killed two men. Bat was at a dance one evening and was dancing with King's ex-girl friend when King barged in and shot Bat in the leg. As Bat fell to the floor, he drew his pistol, and killed the bully.

His wound had not yet healed when he answered a call by Wyatt Earp to come to Dodge City and assist him in his official duties as marshal there. Bat was still using a cane while he enforced the law, as a deputy marshal under Earp, in Dodge City.

In mid-summer of 1876, he tired of the Dodge City humdrum and headed for Deadwood, South Dakota, to participate in the newly-announced gold rush in that area. But Bat got only as far as Cheyenne, Wyoming, for his gambling luck had run out and he was broke. So he returned to Dodge City and decided to run for Sheriff of Ford County, Kansas.

He was elected Sheriff in the latter part of 1877 at the age of twenty-two! Bat also knew Doc Holliday well, but it is said that he greatly disliked the man, tolerating him only because of his friendship with Wyatt Earp. At this time Bat also bought a half-interest in a dancehall.

In the meantime, Bat's younger brother, Ed Masterson, had been elect-

ed marshal of Dodge City and was a competent young officer, well-liked by everyone. Bat, himself, was as competent as ever; shortly after being elected Sheriff, he captured the notorious Dave Rudabaugh for train robbery at Kinsley, Kansas. Even though the young Sheriff had to exceed his boundry authority, he went right ahead and arrested the outlaws way outside his own jurisdiction. Later, this same Dave Rudabaugh became a member of the vicious Billy-the-Kid faction in New Mexico.

On April 9, 1878, young marshal Ed Masterson noticed that an intoxicated man named Jack Wagner was carrying a sixshooter, contrary to the city ordinance forbidding such a practice. Ed disarmed the man and turned the gun over to Wagner's boss, Alf M. Walker, advising him to check the weapon with the bartender according to law. This occurred in the *Lady Gay Dance Hall.* Shortly after, Ed Masterson and Nay Haywood stepped outside the *Lady Gay,* to get a bit of fresh air. A few minutes later, the trouble-making pair, Walker and Wagner, walked through the door; and Masterson saw that Wagner again had the gun in his shoulder holster.

"I'll take that gun," Masterson demanded.

"Like hell you will, who do you think you are?" was the drunken retort of Wagner.

A scuffle ensued and Haywood stepped forward to assist Ed. At that, Walker drew his revolver and told him to mind his own affairs.

At that moment a pistol report sounded, and Ed Masterson slumped to the board walk, shot through the stomach. Bat Masterson, and several other lawmen, had been close by the *Lady Gay* when the shooting occurred, and rushed toward the scene when the scuffling and shouting began.

BAT LEARNED the names of the men responsible, and at once went after them. In front of the *Peacock Saloon,* he found Wagner and Walker. Five shots were fired, and both Wagner and Walker were wounded. Wagner staggered into the *Peacock Saloon,* threw his arms around Ham Bell and cried, "Catch me, I'm dying!"

Bell shoved him off into the middle of the floor with the reply, "I can't help you now." Wagner remained there until some friends removed him to Mr. Lane's room, where he died the next morning. He was buried April 11, 1878, on Boot Hill.

Walker rushed into the saloon also and tried to give his gun to Ham Bell; Bell told him to throw it on the floor if he did not want it. Walker did so and ran out the back door. He fell, a short distance from the *Peacock,* and was taken to a room over the Wright store. He was badly wounded in the left lung and the right arm; later, he died in Texas as a result of the lung wound.

Ed Masterson had walked across the street and staggered into the *Hoover Saloon.* His last words were to George Hinkle, "George, I'm shot." Hinkle put out the fire in Ed's clothing, which had been started by the pistol of Wagner, fired at such close range. He was carried to Bat's room, where he died an hour later, never regaining consciousness.

Ed Masterson was taken to Fort Dodge for burial, with Bat the only relative able to be present at the funeral, as Thomas Masterson, Sr., and his wife were unable to make the trip from Wichita at the time.

Early in July of 1878, the *Comique,* a theatre owned by Dick Brown and Ben Springer, advertised that comedians Eddie Foy and Jim Thompson would star for several weeks.

One evening, the noted Texas gunman, Ben Thompson, went backstage to heckle Foy. Half drunk, Thompson

yelled, "Get your head outta the way; I wanna shoot out the lights."

Foy reported that he never liked Thompson, and thought the badman held the same feeling towards him. However, the plucky little comedian was not to be intimidated; he refused to budge so Thompson could shoot out the lights on his dressing table.

"All right, then, if you want me to splatter your brains all over the wall, okay wtih me, too," yelled Thompson.

At that moment, Bat Masterson walked backstage and disarmed Thompson after pushing the gun toward the ceiling. It appeared as though Ben was just about to fire into the frightened Foy's face.

In January of 1879, Bat Masterson was appointed a United States Deputy Marshal and quelled anticipated trouble in Canyon City, Colorado, between the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad Company and the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Line. The former company claimed that the latter company had not complied with the terms of its lease, and it was determined to take the railroad into its own hands for operation, even if force had to be employed.

Again in June of that year the same trouble flared up in Colorado, with Masterson taking a posse of fifty armed men to Pueblo and maintaining order until relieved by other United States officers.

With the coming of the election for Sheriff, Bat again threw his hat into the ring; but his enemies had organized and began to throw "mud" at his term of office. He was accused of spending too much money for what was done, and all sorts of criticisms were used. It was later learned that too much money was being spent, but it was also discovered that John Means had been forging script against Bat Masterson for conveyance of prisoners to the state penitentiary. Means had been using this money to gamble.

In spite of this, Bat was defeated in the election for Sheriff by George Hinkle; with 404 votes for Hinkle and 268 votes for Bat.

IN FEBRUARY of 1880, Bat left Kansas for Leadville, Colorado, to check on business ventures there. After that, Bat seemed to float around the country, always using Dodge City as a stopping off point, however, as his brother, James, was still city marshal of Dodge.

In March of 1881, Bat served as a deputy in one of Wyatt Earp's posses in Tombstone, Arizona. He was following his profession as a gambler in that city at that time. Bat was somewhere in New Mexico, a month later, when he received a wire from Dodge City asking him to return to see that his brother, Jim, got a fair deal with A. J. Peacock and Al Updegraph in the question whether the latter should be dismissed from their employment or not. Jim Masterson and A. J. Peacock were partners in a dancehall and saloon business in Dodge City at this time, with Updegraph being one of the bartenders. Jim wanted to dismiss the man; Peacock did not.

On Saturday, April 16, 1881, Bat alighted from the train at Dodge and saw Peacock and Updegraph walking across the street. He hailed them and stated he wanted to speak to them, but evidently they misjudged his intentions, for they grabbed their guns and ran for cover.

Naturally Bat took their actions to mean only one thing—a fight. He took cover behind a slight embankment left by the railroad graders.

The firing commenced immediately. Bat's bullets took big chunks out of the corner of the building behind which the two men had run. At the same time some unknown parties fired several shots at the Peacock-Updegraph party, one of the bullets passing through the

body of Updegraph but not killing him.

Mayor A. B. Webster of Dodge City placed Bat under arrest; he submitted without resistance, inasmuch as he knew he would have plenty of assistance if necessary. Bat was fined $8.00 for his part in the affair, the charge being peace disturbance. Updegraph recovered from his wound and died in February of 1883 from smallpox.

Masterson spent 1882 in Trinidad, Colorado, where he operated a gambling concession in one of the many saloons in that city. Bat had grown tired of the name "killer" tacked to his name in Kansas, but he did not remain away from Dodge too long. In June of 1883, he again returned to see that his friend, Luke Short, was given a fair deal in regard to an ordinance recently passed which pohibited gambling within the city limits. Luke, of course, was a gambler and a first class one at that.

The famous peace commission of Dodge City, 1883, resulted from this matter. Its members were: Charlie Bassett, Wyatt Earp, Frank McLean, Neal Brown, W. H. Harris, Luke Short, Bat Masterson, Billy Potillion. Apparently, the gamblers got satisfaction from their demands against Prosecuting Attorney Mike Sutton, for soon after they were allowed to reopen their establishments in Dodge City.

BACK TO Trinidad went Bat, only to return to Dodge again in September of 1883. He made various trips back and forth from Colorado to Kansas, always trying to locate a permanent spot for his profession. In 1885, Bat was in Denver, Colorado, where he acted as referee in a prize fight between Clow and Hands. In Denver he became very much interested in the fight game and spent many hours at the ring.

By now Bat was past thirty and began to think of marriage and settling down. On November 21, 1891, he married Emma Walters, a song-and-dance girl; he established himself several years in Denver by operating a gambling house and burlesque theatre.

In May of 1902, Bat Masterson moved to New York City, where he obtained a job with the *Morning Telegraph* as a sports writer. In 1905 President Teddy Roosevelt appointed him United States Deputy Marshal for the District of New York (Roosevelt displayed a show of favoritism toward all old western gunfighters). He resigned that post in 1907, because it interferred with his sports writing. As the years went by Bat acquired a writing knack which soon led to his being made sports editor of the *Morning Telegraph*. Bat made warm and lasting friendships with many notables of the ring, theatre, and sporting world. A few of his closest friends were Damon Runyon, William S. Hart, and Louella Parsons.

Bat Masterson died at his desk on October 27, 1921, shortly after he had completed his daily column on sports: *Masterson's Views On Timely Topics.*

★

THE LAST BULLET

by Robert Gene McDuffie

Walker swore that this would be his last job as a hired killer . . .

MATT WALKER was tired; so tired his bones ached with weariness. It had been a long, hot ride, and now he was on the main street of town heading toward the livery. Rock Creek was like any other western town, only hotter and dustier. He saw the usual false-fronted buildings which housed the saloons, general store, stage depot, tonsorial artist, eating places, hotel, and at the end of the street the livery which was partly shaded by a Cottonwood.

Due to the hot weather there wasn't much activity on the street. Drowsy horses were tied to the hitch-racks; a couple of buckboards were being loaded with supplies in front of the general store; otherwise, the town was quiet. He left his horse at the livery and went into the *Lucky Chance Saloon*. The heat didn't penetrate so much here and he enjoyed the first touch of cool air he had felt all day. He headed for the bar, and as his eyes became accustomed to the dimness he was aware that he was being watched.

At a nearby table, four men in a card game particularly expressed interest in him. What they saw was a lean young man, hard of muscle with sandy hair and unwavering brown eyes. They noted the bright green shirt and denim trousers, but their eyes kept returning to the worn gunbelt and smooth-through-use handle of his sixgun. They were cattlemen, and from the expression on their faces he knew they had been waiting for him.

He carried his drink over to their table and stood looking down at the round-faced man with the big belly. The man was wearing black-rimmed glasses which, at the moment, had slid halfway down his nose. His eyelids appeared to be closed, but he was actually squinting at the cards he was holding.

"Sit down," the man ordered scratching his long, graying mustache. "I'm winnin' and I never quit while I'm ahead. You're Matt Walker?"

"That's right," he said, pulling up a chair. "You Frank Craig?"

"*Mister* Craig!" was the reply as thick fingers ran through thinning black hair, now streaked with gray. "Don't ever forget that!" The man had two chins, the upper one with a cleft in it; the lower one trembled noticeably as he spoke. Suddenly, he threw down his cards, a triumphant smile crossing his face and he began twisting his hands, one in the other, cracking his knuckles. "I never lose," he laughed meaningfully. "I always get what I want!"

The three cowboys resignedly went to the bar for a drink.

Walker could see no warmth or friendliness in those two dark eyes which stared at him through the black-rimmed glasses. He had known a man somewhat like Mister Craig in Wyoming—a gent who would just as soon kill a woman as a man. He felt as though he were looking through a window where he could see Mister Craig's soul, and he didn't like what he saw in that cold stare. He had promised himself his trigger days would be behind him when this job was over.

He was appalled at the reputation

he had acquired—one of the fastest guns alive. No matter how fast he became with a gun, Walker knew there would always be someone just a little quicker on the draw. And he didn't want the same thing to happen to him that caught up with other notorious gunmen. This had to be his last job; with the money Craig...Mister Craig ...paid him he would buy a ranch and start life anew.

"The Larkins are stubborn hombres." said Craig, putting his glasses into a vest pocket. "I've warned Ray and Johnnie about trying to pirate my land; now I've got to back up what I've said."

"There's no law here yet," commented Matt. "How come you or some of your men didn't ambush him before now?"

Craig popped his fingers uneasily. "Everybody knows how I feel." His dark eyes sparkled with the passion of ambition. "I'm building me an empire —the biggest cattle empire in Arizona. I can't afford any false moves."

MATT WALKER had met Craig's kind before, and watched their greed destroy everything in their path. The more they accumulated, the stronger their desire for more land, more cattle, and more power. He had seen that happen in Wyoming and Kansas, and now he was helping it in Arizona.

"How do I do it?" asked Walker. "The usual card game?"

Craig shook his head. "Might look too fixed. I've used that one too much; people are beginning to shy away from playing cards with me." From his pocket he pulled out a bill of sale, handing it over.

Matt unfolded the paper and read it. It stated that he had purchased a bay horse from the Lazy 2 ranch, by the name of *Thunder,* three months ago. The bill of sale had originally belonged to the Larkins, Craig admitted, but Ed Larkin had unknowingly dropped the paper on the saloon floor when he dug into his trousers to pay for a drink. Walker was simply to accuse Ed of having stolen the horse from a tie-rack in Tonto. Craig had forged Walker's name to the bill of sale—the original having merely been a signed receipt, not payable to anyone in particular.

"Where do I find him?"

"They come in for supplies every Saturday," was the reply. He looked at his gold pocket watch. "Ought to be here any minute now."

"In your letter," said Matt, "you offered three hundred bucks. You only mentioned Ed. If you want both Larkins killed—double your offer!"

Craig squirmed uneasily. "Five hundred for both." he said.

Walker refused; the deal was off unless he got his price. Craig finally placed three hundred dollars on the table. Walker shook his head. "All of it," he said. "Now—not just half."

Craig glared at him, in a black mood. He slowly counted the remaining three hundred dollars and laid it on the table with the other money.

The rattle of a buckboard, stopping in front of the general store, announced the arrival of Johnnie Larkin. Walker didn't get a good look at Johnnie's face because of the black sombrero, but saw the back of thin, narrow shoulders and lithe waist of someone not quite as tall as himself disappear inside the store. He noted that the gunbelt and holster which hung over faded denim trousers looked almost new. Johnnie Larkin would be a cinch; one shot, carefully placed, should kill him.

"There's Ed!" exclaimed Craig, pointing through the window. "That man getting off his horse!"

Walker nodded; he scooped up the money, pocketed it, and went outside. He saw Craig, inside the saloon window, hurriedly *putting* on his black-rimmed glasses. There was an expression of anticipation on the cattleman's face.

Ed Larkin was tall and thin, but

more muscular than Johnnie. His face was brown from many hours in the sun and in his steady brown eyes Walker saw a spirit of courage. Ed seemed to sense something was wrong the instant he saw Walker. He stopped in the street, in front of the bank, as Walker approached him.

"Your horse?" asked Matt.

"That's right. Why?"

"Looks like one I owned. Mine got stolen from a tie-rack in Tonto about three months ago." Walker moved around to the left side of the bay. "That your brand—the Lazy 2?"

"I paid for that horse, Mister," said Ed, "I don't want no trouble."

The sound of their voices attracted attention, but everyone listening cautiously remained a safe distance away. Inside the bank, all transactions momentarily stopped when Walker openly accused Ed Larkin of horse stealing.

Larkin's face paled. "You're wrong, Mister." "Thunder belongs to me; I paid cash for him."

When Matt Walker produced the bill of sale, the light of hope seemed to die in Ed's eyes. He drew a deep breath, held it—then it quietly slipped away from him."

"It's been forged," groaned Ed. "I can tell. That bill of sale wasn't made out to nobody. You're framing me for.... Why?" Then he caught sight of Frank Craig looking out the saloon window and understood.

"I'm giving you two seconds to draw," said Walker, backing away. "Better move fast."

HE COULD hear *people* scurrying off the street, the sound of a horse blowing, then absolute silence. He became aware of his own breathing; it sounded loud and heavy in his ears.

It was obvious Larkin didn't want the gunfight, but he had no alternative. Walker watched the homesteader's hand jerk for his holster before bringing up his own sixgun. The impact of the three bullets which split Larkin's chest flung him back against the hitch rail. Ed fired twice before stumbling to the ground; both shots went wild.

Somewhere down the street a woman screamed and Matt Walker could hear men cursing, knew how they hated a hired gun. He wished now he had never accepted the job; he wanted to get it over as quickly as possible. As soon as he downed Johnnie Larkin, he would ride North; and Walker, the hired gunman, would become a bitter memory—and maybe, someday, almost completely forgotten.

He turned, and walked down the center of the street toward the general store.

"Johnnie Larkin," he yelled. "I just killed that no-good horsethief Ed. If you've got any guts you'll come out and face me like a man!"

Inside the store he heard excited commotion. "You mustn't go out there!" he heard a man exclaim. Someone volunteered to take Johnnie's place, but within minutes Johnnie Larkin appeared on the street. Down the street, a smile of triumph crossed Craig's big fat face. Walker hated the sight of him.

Walker's gun came up so fast that Johnnie scarcely managed to clear leather. Johnnie Larkin was dead before falling face down on the ground. People came running from all directions.

Walker rolled Johnnie over with his boot. A surprised gasp came from him as the black sombrero fell away from Johnnie's head and long brown hair spilled from it.

"She's dead," said the doctor, gravely. "Never had a chance."

Matt Walker shuddered revulsively.

leled the High Sierras, a cloud of white alkali dust rose above the billowing creosote and encelia bush. Ahead of the cloud two black figures were moving.

"Mebbe black day all over," he said. "Honored guests come to Sherman House, why not? I go tell Mr. Boss Sherman."

His bare feet pattered out of the Kitchen, through the dining room and front room of the old desert hostelry. At the front door, he stopped and stared out on the porch, and there was a glint of affection in his eyes.

Dakota Sherman, hotel proprietor, was sitting out there on the porch, sitting as he did, hour after hour, during these days of terrific heat. His great bulk overflowed in waves of flesh and muscle from the rocking chair. From his pink, bald head a single wisp of gray hair rose in a question mark. His open mouth emitted snores on the outblow and gasped for breath on the intake. In front of him were two pails of water and a huge pink foot was thrust in each.

Sung Lee stared at his lord and master, then reached into the hip pocket of his over-sized jeans and brought out a mouth organ. He shined it caressingly on the knee-length tails of his alpaca shirt. One deep breath into his narrow lungs, and he blew loudly. He was playing *"Reveille,"* and at three o'clock in the afternoon the notes of, *"I can't get 'em up"* rang just as truculently as at dawn.

The mouth of Dakota Sherman closed; his head moved on its neck hinge, his pale blue eyes blinked open. He swallowed grimacingly, thrust out both feet and the pails of water tipped over. He strove to rise, but was too entangled and relaxed again. Then his voice shrilled out, a squeaky tenor.

"You dang heathen!" he cried. "Wakin' me up when I just get comfortable! Wakin' me up when I had clean forgot my chilblains. Look at that thermometer over there! The thing says 122 degrees. Me with chilblains at 122, right in the middle of the Mojave Desert. The worst chilblains any man ever had—"

"Honored guests come to Sherman House," announced Sung Lee. "Mr. Boss Sherman be ready, why not?"

A skinny arm and talon-like hand pointed southward. The two horsemen were plainly visible. Dakota jerked himself upright, squinted until his eyes were almost hidden behind the protective furrows common to old desert dwellers. "They're sure comin' hellity larrup!"

Sung Lee slid across the front room to the mantel, picked up an old six-shooter and slithered back to the front porch and Sherman.

"Sung Lee al'ays find good thing come velly slow," he intoned. "Bad thing al'ays come velly fast. Two honored guest men ride hellity lallup; you take slixshooter, why not?"

Dakota thrust the unloaded six-shooter into the bulging flap of his shirt over his belly, leaned back in the rocker and waited. "Bad things do seem generally to come fast," he mused. "Like Sung Lee said. Suppose...he has a hunch?"

THE *CA-LUMP, ca-lump* of hoofs, the mouse-like squeak of leather, the clank of iron shoes on rocks were increasingly clear as the horsemen approached.

"They ain't cowmen," Sherman decided. "They ain't the law. Must be mine promoters. No! Diggity-dog, they're gamblers, that's what. White sombreros, swell goatskin boots, Spanish spurs, plaited silk shirts! Sure, they're hot-shot gamblers....Travelin' light. Just one canteen and one saddle roll between 'em...."

The two horsemen reined up at the hitching rail and studied the decrepit hotel with cold, doubting eyes, which took in at a glance the half-dozen little houses which huddled around the old building like forlorn chicks around a

The handsome Munte Kid was not a gent to trifle with.

Chinaboy's Chance

by Saul Anthony

Those tinhorns who'd cleaned out Dakota Sherman and Jerry Powers figured that Sung Lee would be simple relaxation. They could cold-deck this Chinaboy with ease. But, somehow, Sung Lee kept winning, and failing to bet when he didn't have a good hand. . .

SUNG LEE, weazened cook and factotum of the Sherman House, stared out across the bleak waste of the Mojave Desert and shook his head lugubriously. "Black day at hotel, once more, al'ays," he intoned. "Not one honored guest in hotel."

Suddenly his eyes brightened; out of the south window he saw signs of life on the desert. Down there, far along the tortuous road which paral-

moulting hen. The older man spoke to the younger without moving his lips.

"All right, agreed the latter and raised his voice. "Hello! Hello, hippopotamus! What you got here, a morgue?"

Dakota waddled forward. The two men stared at him with incredulity, so huge and round he was, so red his face and bald head.

"Sheriff after you?" Dakota asked. "No offense meant," he added quickly. "But don't go callin' me a hippopotamus!"

"Thanks for the advice, brother," the older man said. He threw his leg over the pommel and slid to the ground. His companion did the same. "Who's going to take care of this crow food?"

Dakota Sherman hesitated. For nineteen years he had run this old desert hotel, and during that entire time he had never turned a stranger away, no matter what was the visitor's color, condition or poverty. True, he had not had many chances to turn people away. For days at a time, not a single guest would appear. On the other hand, he sometimes had as many as six guests —particulary when cattle buyers came through, during the spring and fall rodeos. But instinctively Sherman didn't want to take these two strangers into his hotel. Sung Lee had given him a premonition of trouble ahead.

He shrugged his plump shoulders. After all, he ran a hotel; a hotel must have guests; he had a duty as host to perform.

"Just a minute," he said, and turned to call into the structure behind him. "Sung Lee! Hi, Sung Lee! Come take care of the horses!"

From the depths of the hotel came the response: A pattering of feet and an intoned, "Yessee, I coming, please, Mr. Boss Sherman."

The two men removed the saddle roll from the older man's horse and mounted the steps to the porch, which creaked under them. Dakota noted their moneybelts, stuffed and well-rounded. There, in the shade, the two produced silk bandanas and wiped the caked alkali from their faces. Simultaneously the hotel proprietor knew who they were—recognized them by reputation. The older fellow was tall, spare, with faded blue eyes, a passive face that could easily have passed the roll call at an undertakers' convention. The younger man offered direct contrast: Small, wiry, black of eye, smooth of face—a handsome fellow in a slick Latin way, with full lips and a black toothbrush mustache.

"Hello!" cried Sherman. He turned to the tall man. "Deacon Wilkins, eh? And your side kick." He nodded toward the younger man. "He's The Monte Kid, ain't he?"

"Good guessing, brother," Deacon Wilkins agreed. "Now what about some grub and then a bed? We've ridden hard and fast."

"Sure," agreed the host, and immediately wished the word unsaid.

As he waddled back to the kitchen to help Sung Lee prepare ham and eggs, Dakota made up his mind to one thing. He'd get rid of these two strangers as soon as he could. He'd give them poor food, a hard bed; that back north bedroom was full of bedbugs. He was sure of that. Some fleas, too. He'd give them that room. He'll tell them right quick that he had run out of food. Sure, he'd get rid of them all right.

He had to get rid of them. Word had preceded Deacon Wilkins and the Monte Kid—word that where they went, hell began to pop.

THOSE SIX little houses around the Sherman House—each surrounded by a sagging picket fence to keep the cattle out of meager gardens, when the herds were driven to the mountains in the spring, and again when they came milling back to the desert floor in the fall—those six little houses came alive. Grapevine telegraph had flashed the news through

the settlement, big news: "Dakota Shreman has two strangers at his place?"

The women could least contain their curiosity. Widow Fleming, directly across the road, sent her daughter, Marjorie, to get the first news—and with her came trouble.

"Ain't any bigger than a minute, Margie Fleming ain't," Dakota thought, rapt with sheer pleasure in the girl's appearance, the unstudied grace of her moment the ivory tint of her face and the blueness of her eyes. But every second of that minute is sure pretty...She must be eighteen, 'most nineteen at that...She ought not to be roamin' loose any longer. I sure'll be glad when she and Jerry Powers get hitched." He raised his voice, "Hello, Marge!"

The girl nodded and pattered lightly up the steps to his side. "You know what I came for. Ma's just flowing over with curiosity."

Dakota looked blank then allowed signs of intelligence to creep across his face. "Oh, you mean about the new arrivals? Tell your mother not to get excited. They don't aim to stay."

"But who are they?"

Dakota wanted to lie, but he couldn't.

"Just a couple of hot-shot gamblers down from Nevada," he said. "By the name of Deacon Wilkins and the Monte Kid. But they ain't stayin'. By the way, Margie, where's Jerry Powers today?"

"He's riding herd for the Terrapin outfit. Why?"

"Aims to come back tonight?"

"Sure. We got our regular date."

"Why don't you do me a favor and him a favor?" asked Sherman. "Why don't you ride out and tell him to stay out there by the chuck wagon tonight? Ain't no reason for him to take that long ride, after a hard day's work."

The girl's expressive face immediately became serious. "What's the idea? Why don't you want Jerry around here tonight?"

Dakota was silent a minute, rubbing neats' foot oil from a brown bottle into his pink feet. "Well, it's safer, that's all," he blurted. "These hot-shot gamblers might set up a table. Jerry's a grand boy, but he's wild. Not exactly wild, but like a bronc that ain't never been broken. He's a gambler, too—a natural gambler. Bless your heart, I've seen that redhead bet on which way a locoed would turn, right or left. A boy like that is just fish for fellows like Deacon Wilkins and the Monte Kid... Now you be a nice girl and ride out to the Terrapin chuck wagon. Tell Jerry Powers to stay out there; you can make him believe anything."

"Is Jerry's money the only thing worrying you, Dakota?" the girl asked.

"Well, it's important money, ain't it?" demanded Sherman. "It's the money you and him aim to get married on. 'Most six hundred simoleons, ain't it? Damn' important money!"

"You haven't any other idea, Dakota?" Marjorie Fleming suggested, mockingly. "You don't want to get me out of the way, too, maybe?"

"Why, hell, no!" blustered Dakota, hopelessly entangled. "But of course if you would stay away—"

Motion behind checked his words. He turned his pink bald head. There in the doorway stood the Monte Kid, fresh washed, cool and handsome in his white silk shirt, bow necktie and polished boots.

"Why, hello," said the Monte Kid advancing. He bowed low before the girl, sweeping the porch with one white hand. "Queen of the Mojave Desert! I salute you." He smiled, showing his regular white teeth, and his eyes flashed frank admiration.

Marjorie Fleming smiled back. She liked the homage which shone in The Kid's eyes, she liked his handsome trimness, his grace, his air of elegance.

"Listen, you!" shrilled Dakota,

[*Turn To Page* 112]

Bass Fishermen will Say I'm Crazy . . .

until they try my method

But, after an honest trial, if you're at all like the men to whom I've told my strange plan, you'll guard it with your last breath.

Don't jump at conclusions. I'm not a manufacturer of any fancy new lure. I have no reels or lines to sell. I'm a professional man and make a good living in my profession. But my all-absorbing hobby is fishing. And, quite by accident, I've discovered how to go to waters that most fishermen say are fished out and come in with a good catch of the biggest bass that you ever saw. The savage old bass that got so big, because they were "wise" to every ordinary way of fishing.

This METHOD is NOT spinning, trolling, casting, fly fishing, trot line fishing, set line fishing, hand line fishing, live bait fishing, jugging, netting, trapping, or seining. No live bait or prepared bait is used. You can carry all of the equipment you need in one hand.

The whole method can be learned in twenty minutes — twenty minutes of fascinating reading. All the extra equipment you need, you can buy locally at a cost of less than a dollar. Yet with it, you can come in after an hour or two of the greatest excitement of your life, with a stringer full. Not one or two miserable 12 or 14-inch oversized keepers — but five or six real beauties with real poundage behind them. The kind that don't need a word of explanation of the professional skill of the man who caught them. Absolutely legal, too—in every state.

This amazing method was developed by a little group of professional fishermen. Though they were public guides, they rarely divulged their method to their patrons. They used it only when fishing for their own tables. It is possible that no man on your waters has ever SEEN IT, ever HEARD OF IT, or ever USED IT. And when you have given it the first trial, you will be as close-mouthed as a man who has suddenly discovered a gold mine. Because with this method you can fish within a hundred feet of the best fishermen in the county and pull in ferocious big ones while they come home empty handed. No special skill is required. The method is just as deadly in the hands of a novice as in the hands of an old-timer. My method will be disclosed only to those men in each area— men who will give me their word of honor not to give the method to anyone else.

Send me your name. Let me tell you how you can try out this deadly method of bringing in big bass from your local waters. Let me tell you why I let you try out my unusual method for the whole fishing season without risking a penny of your money. Send your name for details of my money-back trial offer. There is no charge for this information, now or at any other time. Just your name is all I need. But I guarantee that the information I send you will make you a complete skeptic—until you decide to try my method! And then, your own catches will fill you with disbelief. Send your name, today. This will be fun.

ERIC B. FARE, Libertyville 21, Illinois

ERIC B. FARE, Libertyville 21, Illinois

Dear Mr. Fare: Send me complete information without any charge and without the slightest obligation. Tell me how I can learn your method of catching big bass from waters many say are "fished out," even when the old timers are reporting, "No Luck."

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swinging Marjorie Fleming around. "You go home! You do what I said! About Jerry Powers, I mean. You do it, understand? If you don't, there's sure to be hell to pay!"

"May I escort you home?" the Monte Kid asked Marjorie Fleming, the utmost respect in his voice.

"Well—well—"

The two went down the steps together, smiling at each other.

Dakota felt that he was half-beaten already. He sizzled into torrent of oaths and rubbed his chilblains until they burned. The sixshooter in his shirt front cut uncomfortably into his belly, but the gun and the pain were vaguely reassuring.

DEACON WILKINS and the Monte Kid had set up their poker game in the dining room of the Sherman House. Idly they flipped cards back and forth to each other, dealing cold hands. It was not yet seven-thirty, but it was dark, for the sun, once it plunged behind the High Sierras to the west, seemed to sink in a bowl of ink.

Supper was over in the little desert settlement, and from each house yes were watching the road to see who would be the first to enter the Sherman House and "buck them gamblers for a few simoleons."

Lanky young Jerry Powers, as everyone suspected, was the first. He sauntered diagonally from his own little shack to the Fleming house behind its white picket fence. There he remained only a few moments, and when he came out he had his red head down, his jaw set. He trotted rapidly to the Sherman House and his fists were clenched.

"Jerry's mad as hell," the desert folk opined. "Bet he heard that slicker was over visiting Marge Fleming this afternoon."

Jerry Powers *had* heard, and he pounded into the Sherman House and

[*Turn To Page* 114]

Here's a pair of Tophand Yarns

★ TRAIL OF VENGEANCE

by Gordon D. Shirreff

★ CACHE OF DOOM

by Warner Austin

You'll find them both complete, along with other stories, in the March issue of

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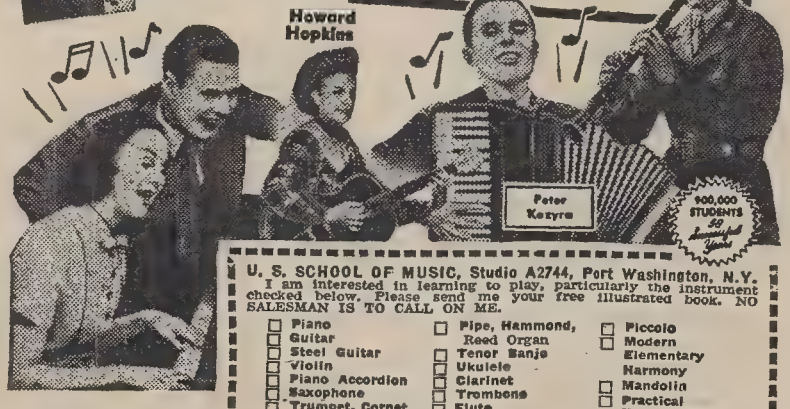

12-Year-Old Surprises Her Friends

"I am twelve years old. Thanks to your Course, I was able to play for the department in our church. All my friends were certainly surprised when they discovered I could play!" — Patsy Jeffrey, Sweetwater, Texas.

"Opened Door to Popularity"

"I was able to play pieces in a short time. Family and friends certainly surprised. Course opened door to popularity." — Peter H. Kozyra, P. O. Brokenhead, Manitoba. (Picture on other side of page)

Now Invited Out Lots

"It's been fun. Hasn't cost anywhere near as much as private teacher. Now invited to affairs, dances. Auditioned for 'Barn Dance Jamboree.'" — Howard Hopkins, E. Syracuse, N. Y. (Picture on other side of page)

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HERNIA

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straight to the dining room where he thrust his red angry face close to the white cold one of the Monte Kid. "Listen, you," he said. "You keep away from Miss Fleming."

"Who's telling me what?" the Monte Kid asked.

Jerry waggled his chin closer. "I'm telling you," he said. "If you don't keep away—"

The movement of the Monte Kid was short but violent. He thrust his head forward and banged it viciously upward. It caught Powers squarely under the jaw and sent him reeling. Instantly Death poised itself in that room. The Monte Kid was on his feet, his six-shooter in his hand and facing him was Jerry Powers, his hand on his holster. Death hesitated a second—and lost the round, for Dakota Sherman huge and overwhelming, plumped his massive form into Jerry and enveloped his arms.

"No shootin'," he squeaked. "No shootin'. Leave your gun alone, Jerry; drop it, I say."

The voice of the Deacon rose calm and heavy. "Listen," he said, "let's forget about all this and have a little card game...I'll keep The Kid away f[illegible] your gal friend, redhead. Sure I will...We ain't here for that kind of pleasure; we're here to have a little card game. Some gambling fun. See?"

Jerry slowly subsided. He pushed Sherman aside and moved to the table. He appeared utterly in command of himself, but his eyes were red with fury, almost as red as his hair, which stood straight up.

"All right," he agreed. "I'll play cards. I'll clean that white-faced little runt, and run him out of town dead broke, if it's the last thing I ever do."

He pulled a roll of bills from his pocket and old Dakota Sherman, glancing at them, winced. He knew what that money was—the hard-

[*Turn To Page* 116]

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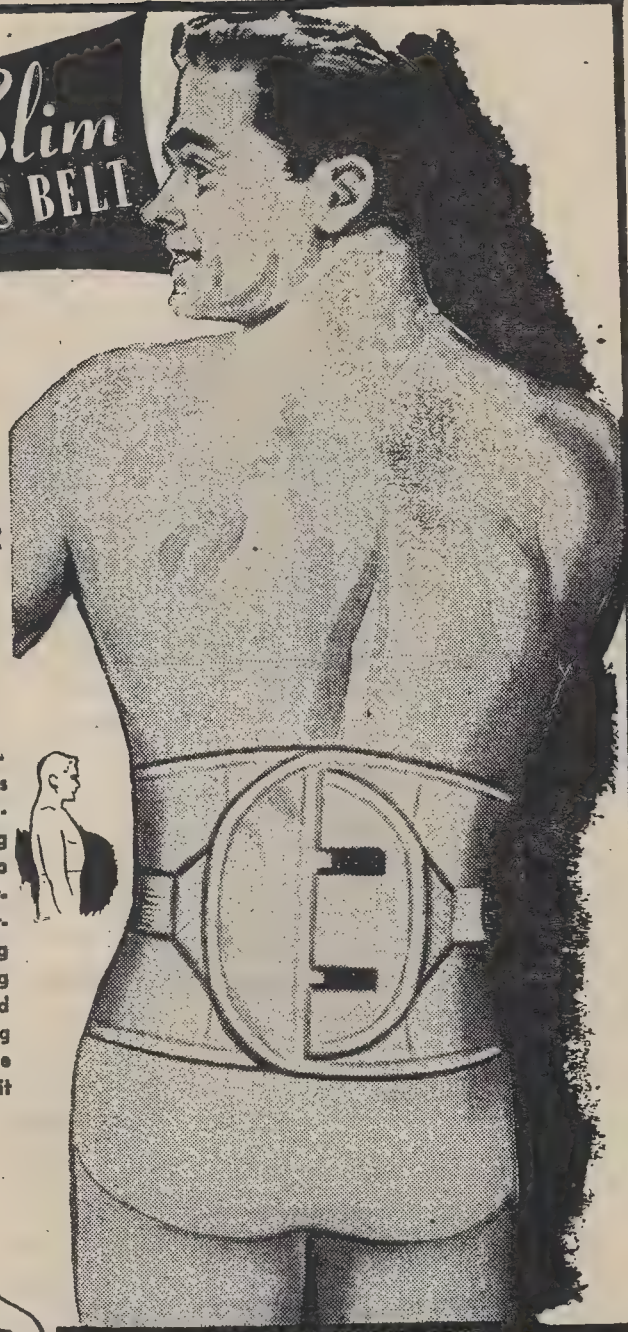

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earned, pinch-saved six hundred dollars upon which Jerry and Margie Fleming were to be married.

"No, no" he protested, but the young redhead waved him aside.

"I'll clean their clocks," Jerry muttered, seating himself at the table.

Powers was a generator which flashed sparks of rage. He sat there, the two oil lamps overhead turning his hair into a copper sheen, his blue eyes first hot, then cold, his young jaw thrust out, his lips set-tight except when they opened for monosyllables: "Deal...Make it two...Pass."

The game was perfectly fair, according to all accepted standards; Dakota could see that. Just the same, Jerry lost rapidly. Dakota knew why. Deacon Wilkins and the Monte Kid had played so long together that, even without signals, they sensed the cards that were in the hand of each other. When one of them had a good hand, the other one, almost subconsciously, boosted the pot once or twice more than was warranted. Jerry was squeezed between their bets like a sponge in a vise.

As the stack of chips in front of him diminished, face grew whiter, until each individual freckle stood out on it. His lips seemed to thin out, his jaw to become sharper. He ran his brown hand through his hair until it was a tousled mass of copper wire. His eyes

[*Turn To Page* 118]

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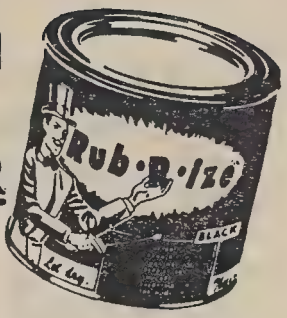

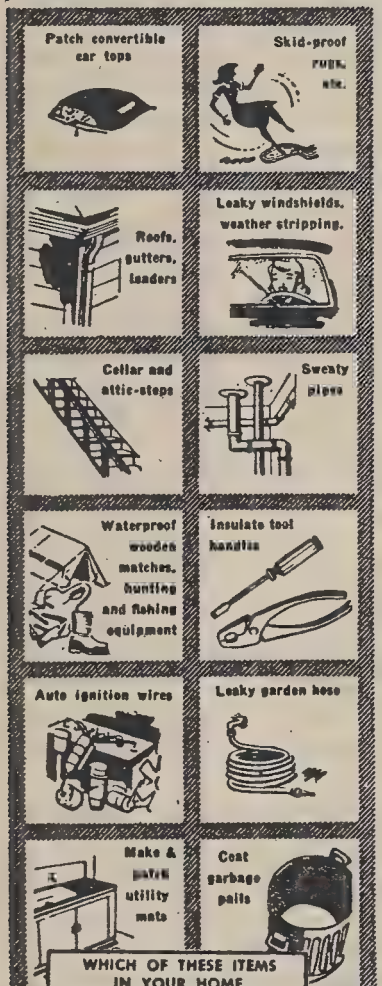

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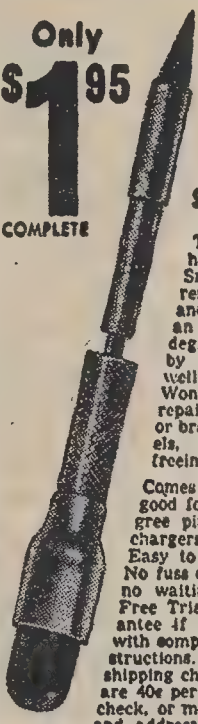

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glowed with frustration, anger. It was not the money alone he was losing. There was something more—and it had to do with Margie Fleming and the Monte Kid.

Those black eyes across the table seemed to taunt Powers. They seemed to suggest that he, Jerry Powers, was an insignificant cowboy while the Monte Kid was a man of the world, slightly condescending, slightly pitying, but very contemptuous—a man who could make short work of winning Margie Fleming.

Moment by moment, murderous rage mounted in that hotel room. Old Dakota Sherman felt the hot breath of it, and knew that there would be a blowoff. Twice, he tried to get Jerry home, twice the young desert man shook off his hand with an oath. Now Dakota saw Jerry fondle the gun on his hip. The old hotel proprietor moved to the sideboard and let his hand rest on a long-necked vinegar cruet. This was fated to be the last hand. Jerry had three nines dealt him, one of them hidden. He pushed in his remaining chips. "Call that, tinhorn!" he snarled.

The Monte Kid turned over a third queen. "The queens sure always like me, boy," he said. "That makes three of them. Queens—desert queens."

For two seconds, five seconds, Jerry Powers stared at the cards. Suddenly he swore a high-pitched, half hysterical oath. He leaped to his feet, knocked over his chair behind him. His hand shot down to his holster, up again, carrying an automatic. At the same instant the vinegar cruet in Dakota's ham-like hand crashed across Powers' coppery head. The young cowboy went down like a wet sack.

Sung Lee came trotting in from the kitchen. "Here iodine," he cried. "Make hurt worse." He stooped and poured plenty of the fluid into Jerry's cut and battered scalp.

"Help me get him home, Sung Lee," Sherman ordered.

"Velly, velly busy in kitchen," Sung Lee declaimed. "Got to plactice on mouth organ, why not?" He trotted out of the door again.

Dakota picked up Jerry Powers and slung him over his shoulder, groaning to himself at the thought of what he'd had to do. In the front room he heard motion, saw a shadow moving across in front of him, out the front door. Against the white alkali road he could see who it was.

"Margie!" he called. "Come help me with Jerry! I had to bash him down."

"Help him yourself," the girl called bitterly. "I saw everything that hap-

[*Turn To Page* 120]

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pened. Or don't help him as far as I care. I'm through with him."

DAKOTA SHERMAN sat in the dark front room of his old hotel and pondered. He had taken Jerry Powers home, put him to bed. Now what to do? In the dining room he could hear Deacon Wilkins and the Monte Kid dealing cards to each other. Suddenly the Monte Kid spoke.

"Guess we've run out of customers, Deacon," he said. "It's only nine thirty. If you don't mind I'll go out and make a little call. There's a desert peach, a blooming lily named Marjorie, across the road and I'd like to know her better."

Right then Dakota's doubts vanished. He crossed to the picture of Abraham Lincoln on the wall above the mantel, slid his hand behind it and brought out a roll of bills, a small roll but all his cash in the world. Clutching the money tightly in his big fist, he stalked into the dining room, a grin on his face. He'd keep those two gamblers busy at any cost; he'd keep the Monte Kid away from Margie Fleming. Besides, he might win; he was a poker player from the old days. Sure, he'd win. Say, he'd win back that six hundred that Jerry had lost, and give it to the redhead and Margie for a wedding present. Sure, he'd win.

"Well, boys," he said jovially. "What about a little game with the old man? You can't be lucky forever."

The Monte Kid looked disappointed, but Deacon Wilkins nodded. "Sure," he said. "Anything to please."

Dakota picked up the chair that Powers had knocked over, pulled it to the table, pushed over his bills for a stack of chips and sat down. Out in the kitchen Sung Lee played his mouth organ—old, mournful tunes. From time to time he peered into the room, shook his head in sorrow and retreated to his sad music.

[*Turn To Page* 122]

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In less than half an hour Sherman rose heavily from the table. He had lost all his cash. The Monte Kid rose, too, and looked eagerly toward the door. It wasn't too late to call on Margie Fleming. Dakota saw that eagerness. He musn't let the Kid go, not after the sacrifice he had made already. Besides, he might yet win back all his money, and that six hundred of Powers', too.

"Cleaned of ready cash, boys," he said. "But I still got the old hotel." He forced a laugh. "What would you allow me on it? It's insured for two thousand dollars."

Deacon Wilkins looked at the Monte Kid and the two thought silently for a minute. The Deacon spoke to the Monte Kid, ignoring Sherman. "This looks like a pretty good hangout for a while," he said. "Probably plenty of cowboys around ready to gamble. We can't go back north right away. What do you say we allow the old geezer one grand for his dump and play it out with him?"

"Fifteen hundred," said Dakota, gasping like a fish out of water. "Make it fifteen hundred."

"All right," said Deacon Wilkins, "provided we double the limit. You just write out what I dictate,—a sort of quit claim deed and bill of sale. The Kid will witness...Now sign it... Good. Here's fifteen hundred in chips."

Never had poker chips disappeared so rapidly as those in front of old Dakota Sherman. They seemed to melt away between the rip-saw betting of Deacon Wilkins and the Monte Kid. It was all over in forty minutes.

Dakota walked slowly away from the room,, out toward the front door. "Cleaned," he said. "Hotel and all. After twenty years. Just a fool old man ...Lost...Lost everything."

Depression settled even heavier on

[*Turn To Page* 124]

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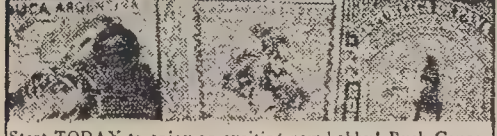

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him when he heard the Monte Kid say, "Listen, Deacon, maybe I could still wake up that little girl across the road." He didn't hear Deacon Wilkin's answer; "Just a minute, Kid, we got one more customer after all."

Across the road in the shack of Jerry Powers, old Dakota found the boy muttering with pain and frustration. Silently he lowered himself to the edge of the bunk. In the dark stillness of the desert night they were two beaten men and they knew it. But back in the Sherman House, one man was not beaten. He was going high, wide and handsome; he was unbeatable, this little cook known as Sung Lee.

From his secret cache in the kitchen —a battered old tea-kettle—Sung Lee had emptied his assorted collection of quarters, half dollars and tattered bills. Solemnly he marched into the dining room with them, dropped them on the table. Who could tell what thoughts were in his mind—loyalty to old Dakota, desire to protect Marge Fleming and Jerry, what else?

"Chinee boy play velly good poker, why not," he said.

Deacon Wilkins gave an obvious wink to the Monte Kid, a wink which said, "W. can use all tricks on this bird; we can clean him in no time at all. Cheat all we want to. Give him the works, Kid, give him the works."

A stack of chips was pushed over to Sung Lee. He fingered them tenderly and placed his mouth organ down beside them as if to guard them. The play started.

Apparently, the gamblers had misjudged Sung Lee. He was not cleaned in a few minutes; the game was still going at dawn. There was a cool and persistant patience about him, deal after deal he would stay out of the pot entirely, but when he came in he was very apt to win. Oddly enough, the hands upon which he stayed, and the hands which he won were almost al-

ways the ones which he dealt himself. Once or twice during the long night Sung Lee picked up his little mouth organ from the table, shined it and played a few sad notes into it.

"Velly nice mouth organ," he said. "Bring Chinaboy luck, why not."

DAWN PAINTED the sky to the east brilliant pink; purple shadows crept up the Sierras to the westward.

Across the road from the Sherman House, Dakota raised himself heavily from one of Jerry Powers' chairs.

He stared heavily across the road at the hotel. Suddenly he whirled to the cot, grabbed Powers' shoulder.

"The lights are still on downstairs in the hotel!" he cried. "What's goin' on over there? Come on let's go!"

Jerry groaned, raised his aching head then rose. Together the two of them hurried through the ankle-deep alkali dust of the road, up the front steps of the Sherman House. They could not move quietly—the old floorboards creaked too much.

The two men stood in the doorway, surveying the picture. Directly opposite them sat Sung Lee, almost hidden by the stacks of chips and piles of money in front of him, his black eyes glittering as brightly as always, his face as expressionless.

Suddenly the Monte Kid slapped his cards down. "I've got it at last!" he cried. "I've got his trick! It's his mouth organ, Deacon! The mouth organ! What damn fools we've been! Every time he deals he passes every card over the mouth organ. It's got a little shiny spot on it. It's a mirror. He's known every card we've had!"

Deacon Wilkins grunted in his throat, reached for the mouth organ and studied it. Slowly he rose from his chair. He started around the table toward Sung Lee. As he moved his hand went to his holster. He pulled out

[*Turn Page*]

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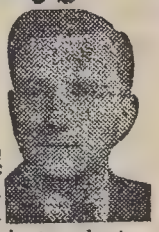

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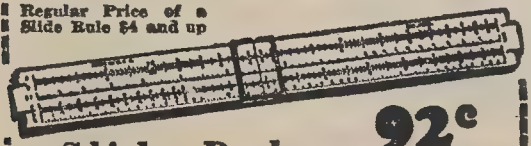

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his gun and held it by the barrel. Around the table in the other direction moved the Monte Kid. He, too, had his gun out, ready to pistol whip Sung Lee.

"You are a little buzzard," announced Deacon Wilkins sadly. "We'll have to give you a lesson."

Sung Lee slid down in his chair, bowed his head. The butt of the pistol in the hand of Deacon Wilkins creaked across his head just above the ear. Sung Lee's head wobbled to the right. Over there the pistol butt of Monte Kid slashed him on the cheek and drove his black top-knot back again—a double action pistol-whipping.

An elephant trumpeted shrilly in the doorway of the dining room, an elephant emitted its animal scream of rage, an elephant stampeded. Dakota Sherman would rather have been hit himself with those pistol butts than to see Sung Lee beaten so mercilessly. He charged, and Jerry was with him.

The old hotel proprietor dashed around the table to reach Deacon Wilkins, but Powers didn't dodge the table; he dove across it, his long lean body flying through space, his head and shoulder smashing the Monte Kid in the stomach and knocking him backwards. The gambler went down and the cowboy was on top of him. A gun sounded, muffled, on the floor and the two men were at each other like wild cats.

Dakota Sherman was still upright. He had wrapped Deacon Wilkins in his huge fat arms; he was squeezing until the sparse form of the gambler seemed to sink into Sherman's flesh. But the gambler was sinewy, and he had his left arm free. He drew it back and smacked it into the stomach of old Sherman, smacked with every ounce of strength he had. Dakota's face grew purple, and he sounded an agony-accented "umph." Then Deacon Wilkins began to use his feet.

[*Turn To Page* 128]

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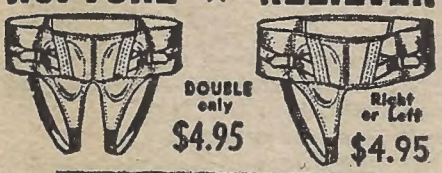

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Sung Lee had slid under the table, his senses spinning. Suddenly right there beside him he saw the pink bare feet of his boss, those unforgettable blue-veined feet, swoolen with chilblains. Then he saw the shiny, high-heeled boots of Deacon Wilkins, and those boots were stomping viciously on those bare pink feet. Up above him somewhere he heard squeals of pain, and those squeals were from Mr. Boss Sherman.

Like a little octopus, Sung Lee went after those stomping feet of Deacon Wilkins. He caught them, he pressed them together, he braced himself and pulled. Down went Deacon Wilkins, and on top of him was the huge bulk of Dakota Sherman. When that weight dropped on a man, he would plead for mercy—if he had any breath left with which to plead.

Sung Lee crawled out from underneath the table. He was very pleased with what he saw; on one side of the room, Jerry Powers was sitting on the supine form of the Monte Kid; and from time to time Jerry was slapping The Kid's face—slapping just enough to make the gambler realize that he was under complete subjection. And on the other side of the room, purple and panting, Sherman was perched on the stomach of Deacon Wilkins, and Dakota was giving Deacon Wilkins a lecture in behavior.

"Pistol-whippin' a poor Chinaboy like that!" Sherman said. "Pistol-whippin' my Sung Lee! I've a notion to kill you, Deacon Wilkins; but I won't. Now listen! Will you get your horses and beat it within three minutes? Nod your head if you mean yes; and if you say no I'll bounce on you again."

Apparently there was no answer from Deacon Wilkins. Dakota raised himself on his knees, then dropped heavily on the gambler's stomach again. Three times he bounced that

[*Turn To Page* 130]

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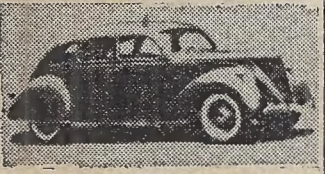

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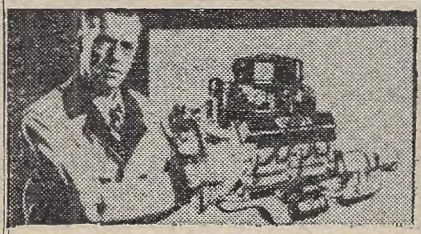

"Motor Overhaul" actually makes your car run like new in 60 seconds because it goes to work instantly—*while you drive*—to recondition your motor—to give it a tremendous new power and pep!

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Your car—treated with "Motor Overhaul"—recovers all its pep and power and you stop wasting gas. It's almost like owning a brand new car for $2.98!

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B. F., Chicago, Ill. "I never saw anything work so fast! 'Motor Overhaul' improved my pickup and gas mileage immediately!"

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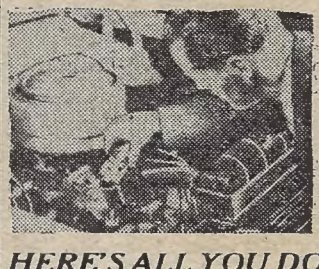
E. S., Highland Park, Ill. "My car's eight years old. But so far I haven't had one major repair bill—thanks to 'Motor Overhaul'."



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Act now! Mail your order today—on absolute money-back guarantee. See what Motor Overhaul does for your car's performance!

SENSATIONAL GUARANTEE

Try "Motor Overhaul" in your car, truck, tractor or other gasoline engine. If you aren't astonished at your engine's new, amazing pep and performance—if you can't honestly say, that "Motor Overhaul" makes your car *run like new*—then return the can within 10 days for complete refund—no questions asked! You don't risk one cent! "Motor Overhaul" must give you NEW CAR PERFORMANCE or your MONEY BACK!

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—Continued from Back Cover

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